STARTLING STORIES

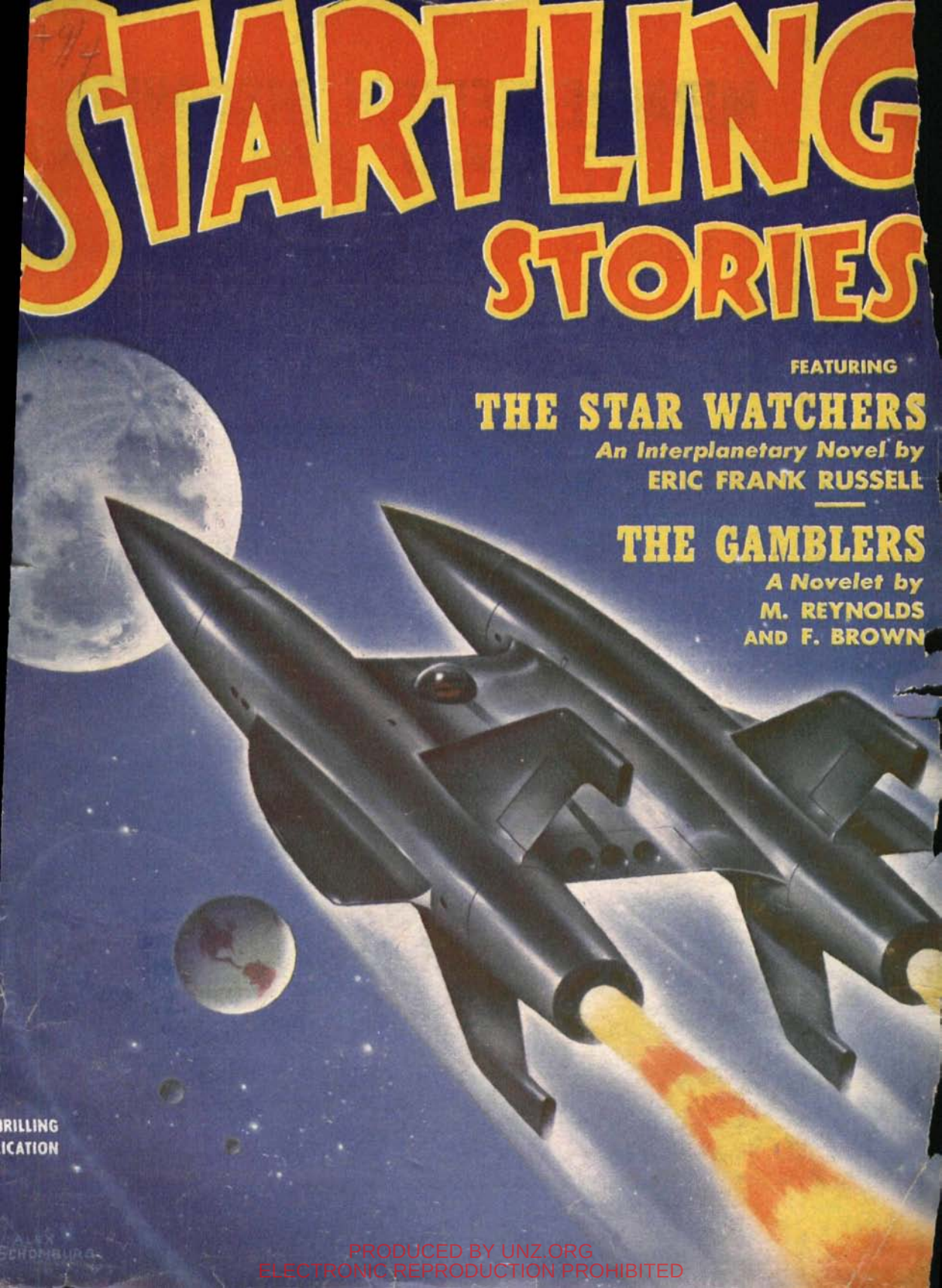
FEATURING

THE STAR WATCHERS

An Interplanetary Novel by
ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

THE GAMBLERS

A Novelet by
M. REYNOLDS
AND F. BROWN



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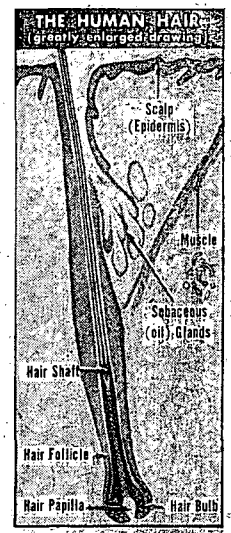

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Symptoms: Dry, irritated scalp. Excessive hair loss.
Result: "Excessive hair loss ceased entirely. *New hair growth replaced those which were formerly lost.*"

CASE 847 Housewife, 42
Symptoms: Considerable loss of hair *following permanent.* Hair came out in handfuls.
Result: *Hair loss ceased.* A complete regrowth of *hair occurred later!*

CASE 1206 Druggist, 26
Symptoms: "*Hereditary*" *premature baldness. Father largely bald at 25 years of age.*
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STARTLING STORIES

Vol. 24, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION November, 1951

A Complete Book-Length Novel

THE STAR WATCHERS.....Eric Frank Russell 10
Posted on every life-bearing planet are these oddly selfless guardians — amiable, but vengeful and merciless in striking down any who menace man's long agonizing climb to the stars

A Novelet

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SAMUEL MINES, *Editor*

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PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

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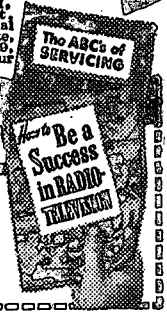

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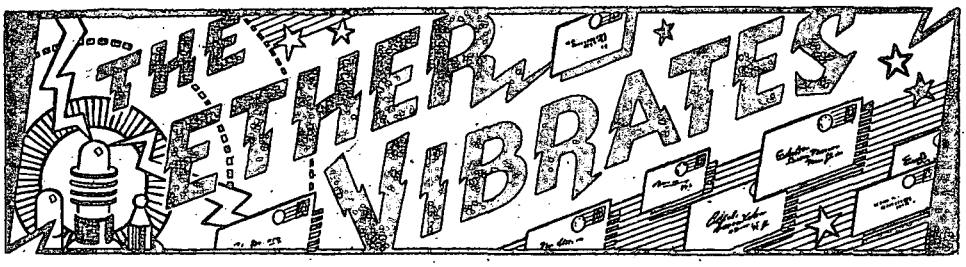

SHOULD any of you detect a strange hand at the throttle, it is more illusion than fact. The impress of Merwin remains; like footsteps on the sands of time, only gradual erosion will wear them away. Actually, the imminencies of publishing being what they are, the stories in this issue and many to come, were long ago selected by my predecessor, with only a slight assist from me. The only things immediately different, therefore, are the departments, in which you may detect a certain wary fumbling, like unto a spaceman stepping out upon a new world and testing the atmosphere, meanwhile keeping a weather eye out for concealed mines, booby traps and BEMS.

Grist for the Mill

As to stories, policy and so forth—it is our belief that a magazine's policy is not something that is cast and hardened in its mold overnight. It grows and evolves and changes with the times. To begin with we'll have only one policy —to come as close as possible to having no policy. That is, we propose to be as catholic as possible in our fiction tastes. Everything will be grist for the mill that qualifies as good science-fiction.

We expect to be open to change and experimentation. For unlike any other form of literature, the stf story declines the moment it freezes in form and refuses to experiment. We intend to keep broadening its base.

Fiction of the Future

Fortunately, the auguries are good. Stf has displayed a vitality in contrast to other forms of fiction which is heartening. In a very real sense, stf is the fiction of the future. And it becomes increasingly so as it moves out of the Flash Gordon class and begins to deal with the essential, universal human problems molded and motivated by future conditions.

That our authors have been able to anticipate and predict future conditions in so many instances is a credit to them. A great number of stories we have bought would have graced the shiniest of slicks. Heinlein's JERRY WAS A MAN in our opinion outclassed several of its successors which ran in the Satevepost. And few magazines anywhere have printed anything as sheerly magnificent as Kuttner's DARK WORLD and MASK OF CIRCE.

Science fiction therefore, can be all things to all men—escape, reverie, prediction or what have you. But its potentialities are still not fully realized. The form is not fixed, it is astonishingly fluid.

For example, there has been little done in the realm of the deductive stf story. To be sure Frank Belknap Long has created a space detective and Jack Vance an interplanetary sleuth known as Magnus Ridolph (sold to the movies, incidentally) but these were only a tentative approach to a large and intriguing field.

A Foothold on Reality

The essential question which opens up here is this: what will crime be like in the future? And what will the methods of detection be like? The answers are apt to be a type of stf story with something of a new slant. Gimmicks yes, but a foothold on reality, a tie to the present and a reach into the future.

The same with any problem of human relationships. What will the family of the future be like? The politics of the future? Our pet peeve is the story which goes 5000 years forward in time and 900 back for its politics, coming up with kings, dictators, emperors or other mediaeval systems complete. Even the odds bodikins school of dialogue is adopted intact. This is a confusion of the fairy tale with science-fiction, but there is a clear line between magic and fantasy even if it gets very thin at times. You might say that no one expects a fairy tale to have logic or even be reasonable, whereas a

(Turn to page 8)

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THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—*get across to him or her your ideas*? That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby these things can be *intentionally*, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have privately taught this nearly-lost art of the practical use of mind power.

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fantasy must always be explainable in some fashion.

THE following collection of letters are aimed at Merwin, having been received mostly before his departure, and any barbs contained herein, belong to him.

Our own hide has not yet developed the proper consistency for protection, but that will doubtless come in time.

RETRIBUTION
by Wallace West

M'aidez!"#$%—&'()*@¢?

Have just obtained the July issue of Startling and am highly pleased with cover, illustrations and the kind words of your blurb, BUT. . . .

I hope that, by this time, you finally have stopped sticking yourself full of late Roman fibulae* and are contemplating buying me a lunch after that blooper through which you confuse Browning's "Childe Roland" with Byron's "Childe Harolde". Tsk! It jumped at me because I hunted high and low through Byron for that quote before finding it where it belonged. Just please tell the gentle readers I had it "Roland" in copy.

Incidentally, I agree that Byron could have . . . and did . . . write some nice science fiction. His "Darkness" would scare the pants off Iskra.—*Ralston, New Jersey.*

*Yeah! Further research reveals the Romans *did* have diaper-sized safety pins in the days of the Empire. Which does mean that Mr. Hunt, in 1849, pulled a fast one on the Patent Office.

Echoes of this brawl reached me faintly through the sage and cactus. All I can say is that if West wants Merwin to buy him a lunch he'll have to interrupt him at his labors. He is, we hope, currently writing like mad.

HELP WANTED
by J. T. Oliver

WITCH WAR is the best story you have published in months. Matheson is a genius. His talent is truly unique. Let's have some more of his work. In fact, let's have lots more off-trail work. I get so doggone tired of the same old stuff over and over. Hooray for Matheson. Etc.

Can you tell me the name of an old story in which a cat enters a casket and chews up a dead man? It is a grisly yarn, old as the proverbial hills, and I think Ambrose Bierce wrote it. I'd like very much to get the title and author so I can look it up. Research, you know.—*315-27th St., Columbus, Ga.*

Sorry, J.T., we don't know it either. But I'll bet eighteen or nineteen thousand of our readers do.

Just duck, boy.

ALL THIS AND BROWNING TOO
by Washington Ch. Divan

Dear Sir:

With reference to The Dark Tower: shame!

It was NOT Childe Harold; it was Childe Roland!

It was NOT Lord Byron; it was Robert Browning!

And both Byron and Browning were SF fans, even though the term wasn't used in their time.

Browning often visited my great grandfather, Simpson S. Divan, in London, and the old gentleman wrote in his diary of the excited discussion of a polmorph by his guests.

Browning probably picked up his key line—quoted in SS—from the third act of King Lear. That is, "Childe Roland to the dark tower came." And Shakespeare in turn was referring to an old Scotch ballad about a hero named Childe Rowland.

Outside of the above, The Dark Tower was super.—*2445 Fifteenth St. N.W Wash., D.C.*

A word in your ear, monsieur. It is bad enough to make a small error in bibliography, but to have nearly everybody in the U.S. pointing it out comes under the heading of cruel and unusual punishment, which is expressly forbidden by the Constitution. We don't say this is why Merwin left town, but we do hope he is having a good time out in the pastoral atmosphere of the mid-west.

—AND MORE
by Jack C. Miske

Dear Mr. Merwin:

I thought you might like to know about the erroneous nature of some of your remarks concerning the source of the title of Wallace West's story "The Dark Tower," although you've probably already heard too much about the matter.

I think Mr. West got the phrase not from Byron's *Childe Harold,* as you suggested, but from Robert Browning's much shorter poem *Childe Rolande to the Dark Tower Came.* Browning in turn seems to have got it from Edgar's song as the close of act three, scene four of Shakespeare's *King Lear,* where Edgar, feigning madness, sings,

> "Child Rowland to the dark tower came;
> His word was still, 'Fie, foh, and fum,
> I smell the blood of a British man.'"

Incidentally, Byron's name prior to his tenth year was properly George Gordon Byron; after that, George Gordon, Lord Byron. The correct title of the poem you mentioned is *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage.* Based on Italian history, it is a major

(Continued on page 130)

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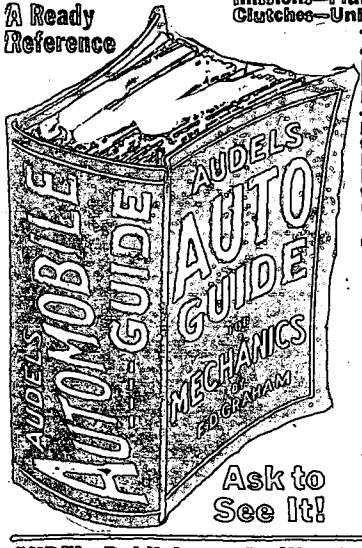

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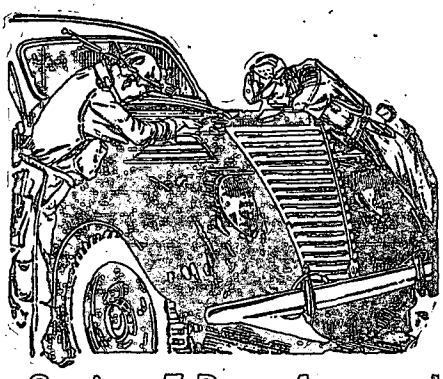

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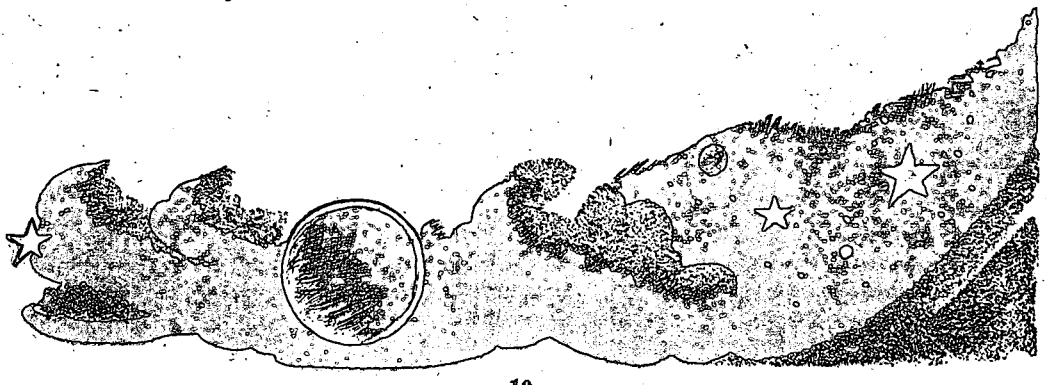
The STAR WATCHERS

A Novel by ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

I

SOLEMN and grave the World Council sat as he walked toward them. They numbered twelve, all sharp-eyed, gray or white of hair, their faces lined with many years and much experience. Silently, with thin lips, firmed mouths, they watched him come on. The thick carpet kept saying *hush-hush* as his feet swept over it. The silence, the watching eyes, the whispering of the carpet, the leaden weight of deep, unspoken anxieties—all showed that this was a moment distinct from other minutes which are not moments.

Reaching the great horseshoe table at which the others were seated, he halted, looked them over, starting with the untidy man on the extreme left and going slowly, deliberately around to the plump one on the far right. It was a pe-



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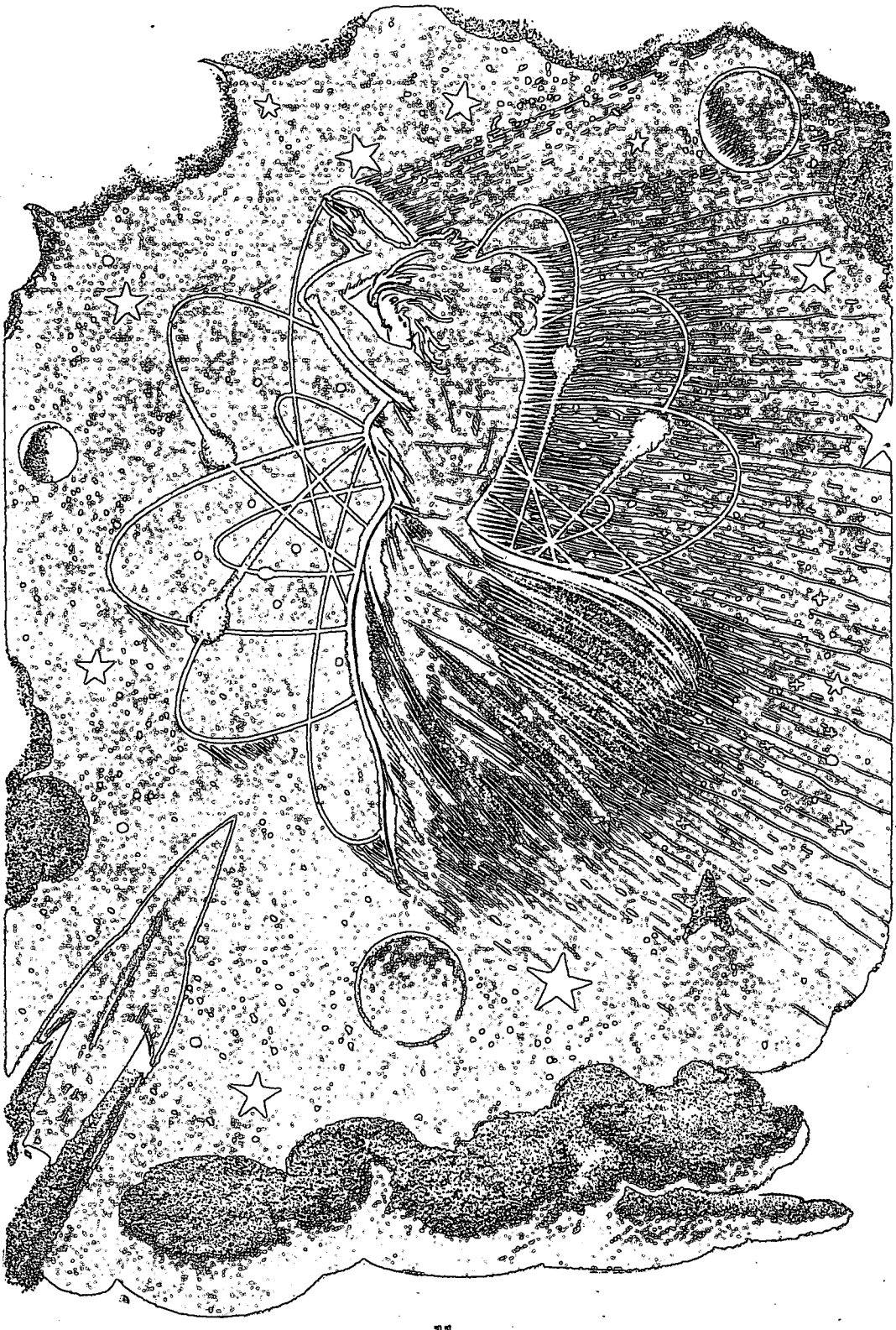

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culiarly penetrating examination which served only to enhance their manifest uneasiness. One or two fidgeted like men who feel some of their certitude beginning to evaporate. Each seemed secretly relieved when the gaze passed on to his immediate neighbor.

In the end, his attention went back to the lion-maned Oswald Heraty who presided at the table's center. The pupils of his eyes shone and the irises were flecked with silver as he looked at Heraty and spoke in slow, measured, unhurried tones.

He said, "Captain David Raven, at your service, sir."

Leaning back in his chair, Heraty sighed, fixed his worried stare upon the immense crystal chandelier dangling from the ceiling. It was difficult to tell whether he was marshaling his thoughts, or carefully avoiding the other's eyes, or finding it necessary to do the latter in order to achieve the former. Other members of the Council now had their heads turned toward Heraty, partly to give attention to what he was about to say, partly because to look at Heraty was not to look at Raven. They had all watched Raven's entrance but none wanted to study him close up. None wanted to study him; none wanted to be studied by him.

Still frowning at the chandelier, Heraty spoke in the manner of one shouldering an unwanted but immovable burden. "We are at war."

The table waited. There was only silence.

HERATY went on, "I address you vocally because I have no alternative. Kindly respond in the same manner."

"Yes, sir," was Raven's totally inadequate response.

"We are at war," Heraty repeated. "Does that not surprise you?"

"No, sir."

"It ought to," put in a Council member on Heraty's right. He was a little aggrieved by Raven's lack of reaction. "We have been at war for about eighteen months and have only just discovered the fact."

"Kindly leave this to me," suggested Heraty silencing the speaker with an impatient wave of one hand. For an instant—only an instant—he met Raven's eyes as he asked, "Have you known or suspected that we were actually at war?"

"No, sir."

"Surely you should have done?"

"I have not bothered to estimate the probable time factor. That we would be involved in war, some time or other, was obvious from the start."

"From what start?" inquired the fat man on the right.

"From the moment we crossed space

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—THE EDITOR.

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and settled another planet," Raven told him. He was disconcertingly imperturbable about it. "War then became inherent in the newly-created circumstances."

"Meaning we blundered?"

"Not at all. Progress demands payment. War is the price. Sooner or later the bill is presented."

Heraty took over again. "Never mind the past. We, as individuals, had no control over that. It's our task to cope with the present and the immediate future." He rubbed his chin, said to Raven, "Venus and Mars are attacking us. Officially, we can do a fat lot about it. It's a war that isn't a war."

"A difference of opinion?" Raven asked, betraying the shadow of a smile.

"It began with that. Now it has gone a whole lot further. They've turned from words to deeds. Without any formal declaration of war—indeed, with every outward appearance of friendship and blood-brotherhood—they are implementing their policies in a military manner. They've been at it for something like eighteen months, and we've only just discovered that we're being hit. That sort of thing can go on too long."

"All wars go on too long," Raven observed.

They viewed this as a profound thought. There was a faint murmur of agreement and much nodding of heads. Two of them went so far as to glance straight at him, though as briefly as possible.

"The worst of it is," continued Heraty morbidly, "that they've got us in a fix of our own devising and, officially at any rate, there's no way out. What's the answer to that?" He did not wait for suggestions. He provided an answer himself. "We must take action which is unofficial."

"Me being the goat?" inquired Raven.

"You being the goat," Heraty confirmed.

For a moment the silence was heavy while Raven stood waiting politely and

RAVEN

the Council occupied itself with various thoughts. There was plenty of food for thought. There had been wars before, in the far past, the very far past; some slow and tortuous, some swift and bloody. But they had all been Earth-wars. A conflict between worlds was something different and posed new problems to which bygone lessons did not apply. Moreover, a new-style war, conducted with new weapons, employing new techniques, likewise posed fresh problems not solvable on the basis of past experience. There was nothing to go by other than the hard facts of today.

After a while, Heraty said, "Venus and Mars have long been settled by *homo sapiens*, our own kind, our own blood. They are our children but no longer see it that way. They think they're grown up. They've been agitating for self-government for the last couple of centuries. They've been demanding the key of the house while they're still damp from their christening. We've refused their heart's desire. We've told them to wait, be patient. See where it puts us!"

"Where?" invited Raven, smiling.

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"Squarely on the horns of a dilemma, and both of them uncomfortably sharp." Heraty shifted in his seat as though his southern aspect was peculiarly susceptible to suggestion. "Without self-government the Venusians and Martians remain Terrestrials, officially and legally, sharing this world with us, enjoying all our rights as common citizens. That means they can come here as often and for as long as they please, in any numbers." He bent forward, slapped ireful hands on the table. "They can walk right in, through the ever-open door, while crammed to the top hairs with arson, sabotage and every form of malicious intent, and we can't keep 'em out. We can't refuse entry unless we first make them precisely what they want to be, namely, aliens. We won't make aliens of them."

"Too bad," sympathized Raven. "There are good reasons?"

"Of course. Dozens of them, including some known only to a select few." Heraty hesitated, went on, "One such is that we are on the verge of getting to the Outer Planets. That's a jump, a heck of a big jump. To back it up to the limit, settle ourselves there in strength and get properly established, we'll need all the resources of three worlds without any short-view quibbling between them."

"I can well imagine that," Raven agreed, thinking of Venusian fuel-deposits and of Mars' strategic position.

LOWERING his voice to lend significance to his words, Heraty continued: "In due time there'll be another jump. It will take us to Alpha Centauri —and there is some good though unpublished evidence to suppose it may bring us head-on against another intelligent life form. If that does occur we'll have to hang together lest we hang separately. There will be no room for Terrestrials, Venusians, Martians, Jovians and other planetary tribes. We'll all be Solarians, sink or swim. That's how it's got to be whether nationalist-minded specimens like it or not."

"So you're faced by another dilemma," remarked Raven. "Peace might be assured by publishing the warning facts behind your policy—and thereby creating general alarm plus opposition to further expansion."

"Precisely!" Heraty agreed. "You've put it in a nutshell. There's a conflict of interests which is going too far."

"Hm! A pretty setup. As sweet a mutual animosity as could be contrived. I like it. It smacks of an enticing chess problem."

"That's Carson's parallel," remarked Heraty. "He called it super-chess for reasons you've yet to learn. He said it's time we stuck a new piece on the board. You'd better go see him and get informed. Carson's the man who raked the world for someone like you."

"Me?" David Raven registered mild surprise. "Are there no others like me?"

"That I wouldn't know." Heraty showed himself far from anxious to discuss the subject. "Such matters are left entirely to Carson, and he has his own secrets. You'd better go see him right away."

"Very well, sir. Is there anything else?"

"Only this: you were brought here to let you see that the World Council is behind you, even though unofficially. Your job is to stop this war—if you can. You'll have no badge, no documents, nothing to show that you have any special status. All you'll have will be your own abilities and our moral support. No more!"

"It may be enough."

"Possibly," admitted Heraty. "I'm in a poor position to judge. Carson's more capable in that respect. For what little it's worth, my own opinion is that before long your life won't be worth a minute's purchase—and I sincerely hope I'm wrong."

"Me, too," said Raven, blank-faced.

The Council fidgeted again, suspecting him of secret amusement at their expense. The deep silence came back, and

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their formerly evasive eyes were on him as he walked away with the same slow, deliberate, confident gait with which he had entered. Only the carpet whispered and when he went out the big door closed quietly, without a click.

"War," remarked Heraty, "is a two-way game."

II

CARSON proved to be tall, thin, sad-faced, like one who regretted both the necessity and expense of floral offerings. His coffin-bearer's countenance was a

LEINA

mask behind which lurked an agile mind, a mind that could speak without benefit of lips. In other words, Carson was a Type One Mutant, a true telepath. There's a distinction here: true telepaths differ from sub-telepaths in being able to close their minds at will.

Looking approvingly at Raven's equally tall but broader, heavier frame, and noting the lean, muscular features, his mind made contact without an instant's hesitation. Invariably a 1M recognizes a fellow 1M at first sense, just as a man sees a man because he is not blind, or hears when not deaf.

His mind inquired, "Did Heraty spout?"

"He did. Dramatically and uniformatively." Seating himself, Raven eyed the metal plate angled on the other's desk. It bore an inscription reading, "Mr. Carson, Director: Terran Security Bureau." He pointed to it. "Is that to remind you who you are if you get too muddled to remember?"

"In a way, yes. It radiates what it says. It is anti-hypnotic." A sour grin came and went. "Or so they assure me. There's been no occasion to try it out—and I'm in no great hurry to test it either. A hypno who gets this far isn't going to be held off by a plate."

"Still, the fact that its presence is considered necessary is a bit ominous," Raven remarked. "Has everyone got the heebies around here? Even Heraty insinuated I'd one foot in the grave."

"An exaggeration, perhaps, but not without basis. Heraty shares with me the dark suspicion that we've at least one fifth columnist on the Council. If there's anything to it you're a marked man from now on."

"That's pleasant. You dig me up in order to bury me."

"Your appearance before the Council was unavoidable," Carson told him. "They insisted on having a look at you whether I approved or not. I didn't approve, and Heraty knows it. He countered my arguments with an unanswerable point in which you should be interested."

"What was that?" Raven invited.

"That if you were only one-tenth as good as I'd maintained you ought to be, there was no cause for worry whatsoever. The enemy could do all the worrying, and heaven help the sailors on a night like this."

RAVEN'S bow was ironical. "So now I'm expected to live up to the reputation you've concocted for me. Don't you think I've enough grief?"

"Plenty of grief is my idea," said

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Carson, displaying unexpected toughness. "We're in a jam, so we're flogging the willing horse."

"Half an hour ago I was a goat. Now a horse—and maybe part of a horse. Any other animal imitations you'd like? I'm pretty good at bird-calls, too."

"You'll sure have to call a few mighty queer birds if you're going to keep pace with the opposition, much less get ahead of them. Tugging open a drawer, Carson took out a paper, glanced at it. "This is as far as we've got with a top-secret list of extra-Terrestrial varieties. Nominally and according to law, they're all samples of *homo sapiens*. In grim fact they're *homo something-else*." He consulted the paper again. "To date, Venus and Mars have produced twelve distinct kinds of mutants and possibly more. Type Six Mutants, for instance, are Malleables."

Raven stiffened in his seat, opened his mouth and emitted a loudly vocal, *"What?"*

"Malleables," repeated Carson. "They're not one hundred per centers. No radical alterations of the general physique. They can do nothing really startling from a surgeon's viewpoint. But they've pans backed with cartilage in lieu of bones, are incredibly rubber-faced and to that extent are good, really good. You would kiss one, thinking he was your own mother, if it struck his fancy to imitate your mother."

"Speak for yourself," Raven said.

"You know what I mean," Carson persisted. "As facial mimics they must be seen to be believed."

Indicating the highly polished surface of his desk, Carson continued, "Imagine this a gigantic checkerboard with numberless squares per side. We're using midget chessmen and playing white. There are two thousand five hundred millions of us against a mere thirty-two million Venusians and eighteen million Martians. On the face of it that's some preponderance. We've got them hopelessly outnumbered." He made a disparaging gesture. "Outnumbered in what? *In pawns!*"

"Obviously," agreed Raven.

"You can see the way our opponents figure the situation: what they lose in numbers they more than make up for in superior pieces. Knights, bishops, rooks, queens and—what is so much the worse for us—new-style pieces endowed with eccentric powers peculiar to themselves. They reckon they can produce them until we're dizzy. Mutants by the dozen, each worth a whole battalion of pawns."

Raven said, "Acceleration of evolutionary factors as a direct result of space-conquest was so inevitable that I don't know how it got overlooked in the beginning."

"In those days the old-timers were obsessed by atomic power. To their way of thinking it needed a world-wide holocaust to produce mutations on a large scale. It just didn't occur to them that hordes of Venus-bound settlers couldn't spend five solid, searing months in space, under intense cosmic-ray bombardment, their genes being kicked around every hour and minute, without there being a normal working of cause and effect. Heck, they went so far as to build double-shelled ships containing anti-ray blankets of compressed ozone, cutting down intensity to some eighty times that at Earth level—yet failed to realize that eighty times is eighty times. The vagaries of chance even themselves up over a long period of time, so that we can now say Venus trips have created about eighty mutants where otherwise there would have been only one."

"Mars is worse," Raven pointed out.

"It is," agreed Carson. "Despite its smaller population Mars has about as many mutants as Venus. Reason: it takes eleven months to get there. Every Mars settler had to endure hard radiations twice as long as any Venus set-

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tler—and he goes on enduring it because of Mars' thinner atmosphere. Human genes have a pretty wide tolerance of massive particles like cosmic rays. They can be walloped again and again, but there are limits." He paused, his fingers tapping the desk while he reflected a moment. "In so far as a mutant has military value, Mars' war potential equals that of Venus. In theory—and it's faulty theory as you're going to show 'em—Mars and Venus together can put enough into the field to give us a run for our money. That is precisely what they're trying to do. Up to the present they've got away with it."

"Seems to me," observed Raven thoughtfully, "that they're making the same mistake as the original pioneers; in sheer excess of enthusiasm they're overlooking the obvious."

"And how! They've become so mutant-conscious that they can't see wood for trees. You're going to show them—I hope."

"Hope springs eternal. In what way do you suggest I show them?"

"That's up to you," said Carson, cheerfully passing the buck. "Fat lot of notice you'd take of our advice even if we offered any." He dug out some papers, scanned them and went on, "I'll give you one case which is typical of this squabble and the methods by which it's being fought. It was this particular incident that told us there was a war on. We'd got suspicious of a series of apparently disconnected events, laid several camera-traps. Most were put out of action, a few failed for no known reason, but one registered."

EYES keenly upon Carson, Raven bent forward and breathed, "Ah!"

"The camera revealed how three guys destroyed some important spaceship data which will take a year or more to replace. The first of these three, a Type One Mutant, a true telepath, kept mental watch for interrupters. The second, a Type Two Mutant, a floater—"

"Levitator?" suggested Raven.

"Yes, a levitator. He got them over two twenty-foot walls and lugged a rope ladder up to a high window. The third one, a Type Seven Mutant, a hypno, took care of three guards who chipped in at different times, stiffened them into immobility, erased the incident from their minds and substituted false memories covering the cogent minutes. As it happened, the guards did not know of the cameras, the telepath was therefore unable to detect the trap in their minds, the hypno had no cause to make them go mess up the job. But for those cameras we wouldn't have known a darned thing, except that in some mysterious manner the data had evaporated in smoke."

"Humph!" Raven appeared more amused than impressed.

"There have been several big fires which, because of the importance of their strategic effects, we're inclined to blame on pyrotics, though we can't prove it." Carson emitted a long-drawn sigh. "What a war! They make their own rules as they go along. Their antics play hob with military logistics and if there were any brass-hats these days they'd already be ripe for the loony-bin."

"Time has marched on," Raven pointed out.

"I know, I know. We're living in modern times, as usual." He shoved a sheet of paper at his listener. "There's a list of known Mars-Venus mutations, numbered according to type, and lettered for military value—if you can call it that." He sniffed as if there were doubts about calling it that. "D means dangerous, D-plus more so, I means innocuous—perhaps. And that list may not be complete. It's as far as we've got to date."

Raven studied it carefully. It read:

1. True Telepaths.	D+.
2. Floaters.	D+.
3. Pyrotics.	D+.
4. Chameleons	I

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5. Nocturnals.	I.
6. Malleables.	D+.
7. Hypnos.	I.
8. Supersonics.	D+.
9. Mini-engineers.	D.
10. Radiosensitives.	D.
11. Insectivocals.	D.
12. Teleports.	D+.

When he had finished, Raven asked, "So far as you know all these skewboys remain true to type? That is to say, the floaters can only levitate themselves and anything they're able to carry, but cannot cause levitation of objects? The teleports have the reverse aptitude of levitating objects but cannot lift themselves? The telepaths aren't hypnotic and the hypnos aren't telepathic?"

"That is correct. One man, one aptitude."

"Hah!" said Raven, grinning broadly. "Ha!" Stuffing the list into a pocket, he got up, went toward the door. "They are under the delusion that Old Mother Earth ain't what she used to be."

"You said it. She's aged, decrepit, senile, thick-witted and hopelessly out of touch with the facts of life. All she's got left is her last dying kick. You go and shoot her full of life."

"I'll do just that," Raven promised, "providing I can stay in one piece long enough to take aim." He went out, closing the door carefully behind him.

III

THE fun started at once, outside on the street. It could hardly have been more prompt though, naturally, it lacked the finesse that might have been evident had the organizers enjoyed longer warning and greater time for preparation. As it was, the tactic had a spur-of-the-moment touch about it, but what it lost in thoroughness it gained in swiftness.

Raven walked through the front doorway of the Security Bureau Building, gave the come-hither sign to a taxi prowling overhead. The machine did a falling turn into the lower northbound level of traffic, dropped out of that and into the sitting level, and hit the street with a rubbery bounce.

The taxi was a transparent ball mounted on a ring of smaller balls designed to absorb the landing-whack. There were no wings, vanes or jets in evidence. It was the latest model anti-grav-cab, value about twelve thousand credits.

Opening the door, the driver suffused his beefy features with professional hospitality, noted that the customer did not move. Welcome gradually faded from the mat. He frowned, scratched his blue chin-stubble with a cracked fingernail and spoke with a cracked voice.

"See here, Mac, unless I'm imagining things, you gave me the—"

"Shut up until I'm ready for you," Raven snapped. He was still on the sidewalk, some ten feet from the cab, watching nothing in particular.

The cabbie increased his frown, gave the stubble another rake in sonic imitation of a space-mechanic sandpapering the jets. His right arm was still extended, holding the door open. Something wafted the sleeve of the arm, depressing it slightly as if an unseen breath had blown upon it.

Raven came to life, approached the door but did not get into the taxi. "You got a melter?"

"Sure? Where'd I be without one if a bounce-arm snapped?" The cabbie produced one from his instrument-board pocket. It resembled a tiny hand gun. "What d'you want it for?"

"I'm going to burn your seat," Raven informed, taking it from him.

"Are you now?" The driver's small, sunken eyes went still smaller, more sunken. A smirk broke across his face, revealed two molar gaps. "It's your unlucky day, Daffy." His hand dived into the same instrument-board pocket, came out holding another melter. "I happen to carry 'em in pairs. You fix my pants and I'll fix yours. That's fair, ain't it?"

"A pants-fixing performance would interest several scientists more than mightily," assured Raven, "when done with instruments effective only upon

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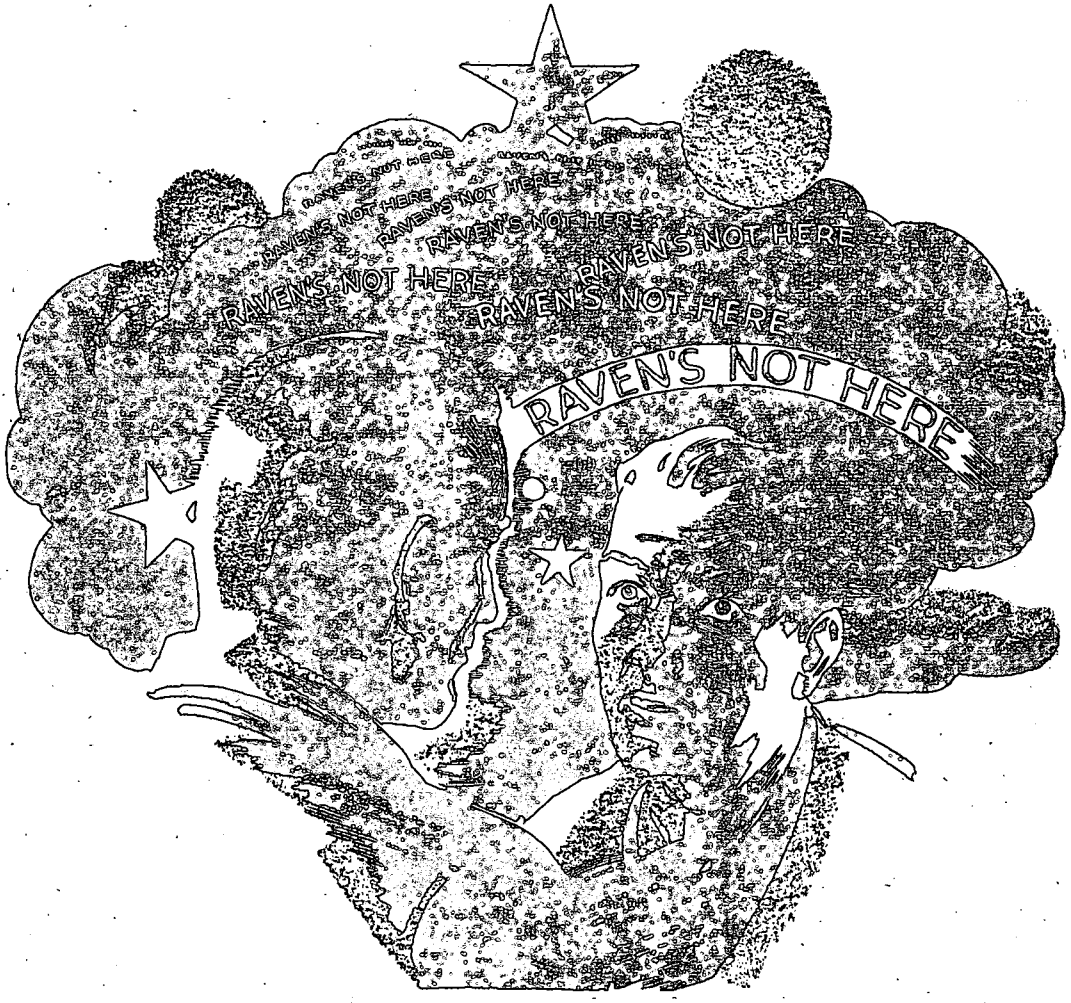

"Progress demands payment," Raven said. "War is the price."

metals." He smiled at the other's sudden look of uncertainty, added, "I was referring to the cab's seat, of course. You must be sort of rear-conscious."

WITH that, he stuck the nozzle of the midget auto-welder into a tear in the rear seat's upholstery, squeezed the handle.

Nothing visible came from the melter, though his hand gave a slight jolt. A thin spurt of strong-smelling fumes shot out of the plasticoid upholstery as something within it fused at high heat. Calmly, Raven climbed into the cab, closed the door behind him.

"All right, on your way." Leaning forward, he put the melter back into its pocket.

The cabbie moped confusedly at his controls while the antigrav machine soared to five thousand feet and drifted southward. His heavy brows waggled from time to time with the effort of striving to think it out.

Ignoring him, Raven shoved an investigatory hand into the still-warm gap in the upholstery, felt around, touched hot metal, brought up a badly warped instrument no longer than a cigarette and not as thick. It was gold-colored, had stubby wings now curled and distorted

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by heat. Its pointed front end carried a lens half the size of a seed pearl. Its flattened rear was pierced with seven needle-fine holes.

He did not have to pull this contraption to pieces to discern what was inside. It was all there and he knew it was there, the tiny engine, the guiding scanner, the minuscule radio circuit that could yell *pip-pip* for hours, the matchhead sized self-destroying charge—all in a weight of something under three ounces.

Turning, Raven had a look through the rear window. So many cabs, tourers, sporters and official machines were floating around on various levels that it was quite impossible to decide whether he was still being followed visually. No matter. A mess of traffic effectively hiding the hunters could also conceal the hunted.

Tossing the winged cylinder into the pocket occupied by the melters, he said to the driver, "You can have that thingumbob for your very own. It contains items worth some fifty credits."

"There's ten owing for that hole in the seat."

"I'll pay when I get out."

"Okay." The other perked up slightly. Taking the winged cylinder out of the pocket, he fingered it curiously, put it back. "Say, how did you know it was there?"

"It doesn't bear thinking about."

"Huh?"

"People who shoot dingbats through cab doors should not think of what they're doing even if they are half a mile away in no detectable direction. Thoughts can be overheard, sometimes." He smiled at the back of the cabbie's neck. "Have you ever been able to do anything without thinking about it?"

"Only once." Holding up his left hand he showed the stump of a thumb. "It cost me this."

"Pity that mini-engineers aren't also true telepaths," observed Raven, mostly to himself.

"Pity that whatzits aren't whozits?" inquired the pawn, twisting in his seat and waggling his eyebrows again.

"Take no notice. I was reciting."

IN SILENCE they covered another forty miles, still at the same level. Skytraffic was thinning out as they got well beyond the city limits.

"Forgot to bring my mittens," grumbled the cabbie. "Shouldn't oughta forget my mittens. I'll need them at the South Pole."

"In that case we'll call it a day part way there," Raven told him. "I'll let you know when." He had another long look through the rear window. "Meanwhile you can get in some practice at shaking off followers. Not that I can tell whether we've got any, but maybe."

"Cutting the dog's lead will cost you fifty." The cabbie eyed him via the rear-view mirror. "And that includes a buttoned trap, guaranteed unopenable."

"You'll open for them because you won't be able to help it," Raven informed darkly. "They have techniques involving compulsion and no cash." He gave a resigned sigh. "Oh, well, by that time it won't matter. It will be too late. Anyway, the fifty is yours just for ducking out." He grabbed the seat-grips as the cab swayed, darted sidewise, shot up into a cloud. "You will have to do better than this. You're not radar-proof."

"Gimme time. I ain't got started yet."

Lying back in his seat, Raven continued to hold the grips while the cabbie performed. The fellow was good, his elusive tactics indicative of the number of uneasy characters he must have carried in the past.

Two hours later, when they thumped the lawn behind a long, low house, nothing was visible in the sky, except a high-flying police patrol heading north. The patrol bulleted onward, in complete disregard of the sphere upon the lawn, and whined out of sight.

Solemnly Raven counted out the promised fifty.

The woman within the long, low house was a little too big, a little too generous-

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ly proportioned and moved with the deliberation of those weighty above the average. Her eyes were very big, wide apart and blackly brilliant. Her mouth was large, her ears likewise, her hair a coal-black mop. Physically she was no sylph, yet at one time or another twenty suitors had pursued her and reacted to her rejections with despair. The reason: what burned within her shone visibly through those great eyes and made her surpassingly beautiful.

Giving Raven a warm, big-fingered hand, she exclaimed with her mind and not with her voice, "David! Whatever brings you here?"

He responded in the same manner, mentally, "Two birds." He smiled into the orbs that made her lovely. "The two I hope to kill with one stone."

"Kill? Did I sense you form that dreadful word *kill?*" Her grip tightened a little as anxiety came into her face. "You have been talked into something. I know it. I can feel it. You have been persuaded to interfere." Releasing his hand, she seated herself on a pneumatic lounge, gazed morbidly at the wall. "We have always agreed that we must never be tempted to interfere. It would not be wise. It would frighten humankind. Frightened people strike blindly at the source of their fear. Besides, so long as we are not guilty of interference they may think us incapable of it."

"That is excellent logic, providing that its premise is correct, and unfortunately it isn't." He sat down opposite, looking at her. "Leina, we've slipped a little in one respect, namely, that they're shrewder than we thought."

"In what way?"

"They got desperate enough to search the world on the million-to-one offchance of finding someone able to interfere—and traced me."

"Traced you?" Her alarm heightened. "How did they manage that?"

"Genetically, through the records. They must have classified and analyzed some ten or twenty successive generations, wading through endless births, marriages and deaths, knowing nothing of what they were going to find, if anything, but hoping for the best. My case was a giveaway in the face of so painstaking a system as that."

"If they can do that with you they can do it with others," she commented unhappily.

"There seem to be no others, only we two—and you're exempt."

"Am I? How do you know that?"

"The sorting-out has already been done," he told her. "In proof of which I have been fingered. Since you have not been similarly nailed down, I can only conclude that they found you but ignored you because you are female or, alternatively, that you are concealed by benefit of ancestors allergic to documents, such as one or two healthy pirates."

"Thank you," she said, slightly miffed.

"The pleasure's mine," he assured her, grinning.

LEANING forward, her eyes keened into his. "David, what do they want you to do? Tell me."

In full detail he informed her what had happened, finishing, "So far, the Mars-Venus combine have been satisfied merely to try crippling us by degrees—the technique of long maintained and gradually increasing pressure—knowing that unless we can think up effective counteraction something is going to crack ultimately."

"It's no business of ours," she decided. "Let argumentative worlds fight it out between themselves."

"That's how I was tempted to view it," he admitted, "until I remembered how history shows that one darned thing leads to another. Look, Leina, it was only a matter of time before Earth decided it had had enough and must hit back. That time appears to have arrived. If Earth can't strike with finesse, it will strike without finesse, roughly and toughly. Mars-Venus will promptly get more riled than ever, decide it's time to become really hard. Your own imagination can take it from there."

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"It can," she agreed without relish.

"Much as I dislike poking a finger into human affairs," he concluded, "I have an even stronger distaste for the notion of hiding under a mountain while the atmosphere flames and the world shudders all around me. Carson thinks I can do something about it single-handed."

"Oh, dear!" Her hands fidgeted. "Why must people be so stubborn and idiotic?" Then she added, "What do you wish me to do for you, David?"

"Look after my best suit." He tapped his chest meaningly. "It fits me perfectly and it's the only one I've got. I like it and don't want to lose it."

"David!" Her mental impulse was sharp and immeasurably shocked. "Not that! You can't do *that!* Not without permission. It is a fundamental violation. It isn't ethical!"

"Neither is war."

"But—"

"Hush!" He raised a warning finger. "They are coming for me already. It didn't take them long to find me." He glanced at the wall-clock. "Not quite three hours. That's what I call efficiency." His eyes moved back to hers. "Do you sense their approach?"

She nodded and sat waiting in silence. Presently the door-gongs clanged softly. Standing up, she hesitated a moment, glanced at the impassive Raven. He responded with a careless shrug. She went to the door, opened it. Her manner was that of one deprived by circumstances of all initiative.

IV

FIVE MEN were grouped by a bullet-shaped sportship some four hundred yards from the house. Two more were waiting on her doorstep. All were clad in the black and silver uniform of Security Police.

The two at the door were burly, leather-faced specimens alike enough to be brothers. But they were different. The mind of one probed at Leina's while the other's did not. One was a telepath; the other something else. She countered the telepath by snapping her own mind shut. The groping mentality immediately sensed the closure and recoiled.

"Another 1M," he told his companion. "Just as well there's a bunch of us, isn't it?" Without waiting for comment he spoke to Leina vocally. "You can talk to me of your own free will." He paused to enjoy a harsh chuckle, went on, "Or you can talk to my friend involuntarily, whichever you please. As you can see, we are police."

She said tartly, "A police officer would refer to another as his fellow officer and not as his friend. Neither would he utter implied threats right at the start."

The second man, who had remained silent up to that point, now chipped in. "Rather talk to me, eh?" His eyes gained a strange light, grew larger. A hypno.

"What do you want?" she asked the first man.

"Raven."

"So?"

"He's here," he added, trying to peer over her shoulder. "We know he's here."

"So?"

"We're taking him in for questioning."

Raven's voice sounded from the room at back. "It is most kind and thoughtful of you, Leina, to try and detain the gentlemen, but it is futile. Please come in."

The invaders slowed up as they got into the room, their expressions becoming wary. They had small, blued-steel guns in their hands, and they kept well apart as if suspecting their quarry of the ability to lay both of them at one swipe.

Still sitting, and amused by their alertness, David Raven said, "Ah, Mr. Steen and Mr. Grayson." He made no attempt to stand, and the sight of their ready weapons disturbed him not at all. "A telepath and a hypno—with a bunch of other skewboys waiting outside. I am greatly honored."

GRAYSON, the telepath, commented to his companion, "Listen who's calling us skewboys." Making an impa-

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tient motion at Raven, he added, "All right, brain-picker, pack your pemmican and mush."

"To where?"

"You'll find out."

"So it seems," agreed Raven, dryly. "The ultimate destination does not appear in your mind. I take it that you do not enjoy the confidence of your superiors."

"Neither do you," Grayson retorted. "Come on, now—we can't stand here all day."

"Oh, well." Standing up, Raven stretched himself. His gaze rested on Steen, the hypno, as he inquired, "What's eating you, Baggy? Never found anyone so fascinating before?"

Steen responded, "I'm wondering what all the excitement is about. You haven't got four arms and two heads. What's supposed to make you so marvelous?"

"He isn't so marvelous," Grayson chipped in impatiently. "Looks to me like headquarters have got stirred up by the usual exaggerated rumors. I know what he's got, and it isn't so much."

Steen laughed mockingly.

"You do?" asked Raven, looking at him.

"Yes, you're merely a new breed of telepath. You can read minds even while keeping your own closed. You read mine while yours remained shut to me. You don't have to open your own before you can peer into others. It's a nice trick and a useful one." He sniffed his contempt. "But as an interesting variation it's not big enough to worry two planets."

"Then what *are* you worrying about?" Raven pressed. "Having learned the worst you've learned the lot. Beat it and leave me to ponder the sins of my youth."

"We've been ordered to bring you in for questioning. That is to say, in one piece. So we're bringing you." Grayson's sniff was louder. "We're dragging back the tiger even though it smells to me of kitten."

"Leina, please fetch my hat and little brown bag." Raven threw a wink to where she stood in the doorway.

"No you don't," Grayson rasped at her. "You stay put." He turned back to Raven. "Go fetch them yourself." Then to Steen, "You go with him. I'll keep an eye on the large lady."

The pair walked stolidly into the adjoining room, Raven leading, Steen close behind. Grayson squatted on one arm of a pneumaseat, rested his gun-hand on his knees, eyed Leina speculatively.

"Unload your dogs, Plentiful, you're no shapely statue."

She flushed a little, sat down.

Grayson continued, "I can't tell what's in your mind. Another oyster, aren't you? Anyway, if you're hoping he'll manage to pull a fast one on Steen, you can save your brain the strain of thought."

Offering no comment, she continued to gaze at the wall.

"Any telepath can outwit and out-

[*Turn page*]

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maneuver any hypno at a distance because he can read intentions and has space in which to get out from under." Grayson gave it the authority of personal experience. "But close up he hasn't the chance of a celluloid cat. The hypno is the winnah every time."

She did not respond. Her face was strained as she strove to listen through and beyond his talk. Grayson made a sudden and vicious thrust at her mind, hoping to catch it unaware, and struck nothing but impenetrable blankness. A faint scuffle sounded in the other room, followed by the merest whisper of a gasp.

Grayson came erect, looking like one who has not heard something that he should have heard. "Besides, there's me here with this gun and there's a mighty tough bunch outside." He glanced at the door of the other room. "All the same, they're slow in there."

SOMETHING about her face, or her eyes; or the tone of her voice aroused his suppressed suspicions. "On your feet, Buxom. Walk in there slowly, two paces ahead of me. We'll see what's keeping them."

Leina got up, bracing herself a moment on the arm of the pneumaseat. Reluctantly she turned to face the door, her eyes lowered as if to delay the vision of what lay behind the door or of what might at any moment walk through it.

Steen came through it, rubbing his chin and grinning wryly. He was alone.

"He tried to be funny," announced Steen, addressing Grayson and pointedly ignoring Leina. "Result: he's stiffer than a tombstone. We'll need a long board to carry him out."

"Hah!" Grayson relaxed, let the gun droop as the other continued toward him. Triumphantly, he said to Leina, "What did I tell you? He was a dope to try it close up."

"Yes," agreed Steen, coming nearer, nearer. "He was a dope." He stopped face to face with Grayson, looking straight at him, gaze level with gaze. "Not a chance, close up!" His eyes were brilliant and very large.

Grayson's fingers twitched, loosened. The gun dropped, thumped upon the carpet. His mouth opened and shut. Faint words came out, uttered with difficulty.

"Steen . . . what the heck . . . are you . . . doing?"

"Raven's not here."

"Raven's not here," mumbled Grayson in mechanical tones, his mind overwhelmed.

"We have seen nothing of him. We were too late."

Grayson repeated it like an automaton.

"Too late by forty minutes," the overpowering voice of Steen insisted.

"Too late by forty minutes," agreed Grayson.

"He took off in a gold-colored, twenty-tube racing craft, number XB109, the property of the World Council."

Grayson got it off pat, word for word. He had the rigid pose and blank, inane expression of a waxy one gathering dust in a tailor's window.

"Destination unknown."

That, too, was parroted.

"There is nobody in this villa but a fat woman, an I.M. of no consequence."

"There is nobody," mumbled Grayson, glassy-eyed, half-blind, half-deaf and mentally enslaved. "There is nobody . . . nobody . . . but a fat woman of no consequence."

Steen said, "Pick up your gun. Let's go outside and report."

He pushed past the fat woman of no consequence, Grayson following sheeplike. Neither favored Leina with so much as a glance. Her own eyes were on Steen, studying his face, reaching for what lay behind the mask.

She closed the door, sighed and wrung her hands in the manner of women since the beginning of time. There were stumbling sounds behind her. Turning, she faced the figure of David Raven swaying uncertainly two yards away.

The figure was bent forward, hands over its face, rubbing its features as

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though not sure on which side of its head they were placed. The body sagged a moment, straightened. The hands came away, revealing a tormented countenance and eyes terribly shocked.

"Mine," croaked Raven's voice. "He snatched away that which is mine and mine alone!"

He paused, staring at her, then he moved forward, arms outstretched, fingers crooked.

"You knew about this. You knew about it and helped." His fingers trembled as they reached for her neck while she stood unmoving, impassive. The hands touched her neck, closed around. She made no move to resist.

For almost a minute he held her like that. Finally he let go of her, backed away hurriedly with shock added to shock. He found his voice again.

"Oh, heavens above, *you too?*"

"Of course. That was the bond between us." She watched him sit down and again start feeling for his face. After a while, she said, "There is a law as strong and as fundamental as that of survival. It says: 'I am Me—I cannot be Not-Me.' So unless—"

"Unless?" His hands came away fast as he looked up startled.

"Unless you play it our way," she informed. "If you do, then what has been done can be undone."

"What do you want of me?" He was upright now, a gleam of hope showing.

"Implicit obedience."

"You shall have it," he promised.

V

HALLER, boss of the waiting bunch, was a thin-boned individual, six feet tall, Martian-born, and a 3M—a pyrotic. Leaning against the tail of his ship, he fiddled with a silver button on the jacket of his phony police uniform and registered disappointment as Steen and Grayson came up.

"Well?"

"No luck," said Steen.

"You mean he'd already gone?"

"Of course."

Haller pushed away from the wall, let go the button, picked his teeth instead. "I guess it was to be expected. The way he lit out from the Bureau showed he was leery and in a rush. How long has he been gone?"

"Forty minutes," informed Steen.

"He had three hours' start, so that means we're catching up. Where's he making for?"

"That," said Steen, "is something he omitted to divulge to the generous helping of femme he left in the house. All she knows is that he came in a taxi, grabbed some stuff he'd dumped here and shot off in an XB109."

"A female in the house," echoed Haller. "What's her place in his life?"

"Ha!" said Steen, smirking.

"I see," declared Haller, not seeing at all. His gaze wandered to the silent, dummylike Grayson and lingered there. Half a minute later a frown corrugated his forehead as he asked, "What the devil is afflicting *you?*"

"Eh?" Grayson blinked uncertainly. "Me?"

"You're a 1M and supposed to be able to read my mind although I can't read yours. I've just asked you ten times, mentally, whether you've got a bellyache, and you've reacted as if thought is a phenomenon confined to some place the other side of Jupiter. What's up with you? To look at you, one would imagine you were suffering from an overdose of hypno."

"An overdose of his own medicine," Steen put in. "He tangled with the lady who happened to be another 1M. How'd you like to be nagged to death telepathically as well as vocally?"

"Heaven forbid!" said Haller, his suspicions lulled. He added, "Let's take steps. That Raven guy isn't giving us any time to waste."

He climbed into the ship, the others following. While the lock closed and the tubes warmed, he dug out his interplanetary register, thumbed its pages, found the item he was seeking.

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"Here it is. XB109 — Berilligilt-coated, single-seater with twenty tubes. Earth-mass, three hundred tons; max range, half a million. Described as a World Council courier-boat, bearing police and customs exemption. H'm! that makes it awkward to intercept openly with snoopers around."

"Assuming we ever find it," offered Steen.

CONFIDENTLY HALLER asserted, "We'll get our cross-hairs dead on it. That half million range is a comfort. It ties him down to Earth or Moon."

He consulted a coded list of radio channels correlated with times. Three-thirty: channel nine. Pressing the appropriate stud, he spoke into a hand microphone. What he said went out in pulses, scrambled, and was much too brief to permit detection and unsorting by any eavesdropper.

"Combine call. Haller to Dean."

"Come in, Haller," responded the loudspeaker, thinly.

"Find XB109."

"XB109. Stand by."

Turning the pilot's seat sidewise, Haller sat in it, lit a Venusian cheroot fifteen inches long. He put his feet up on the desk, eyed the loudspeaker.

It said, "XB109. Not listed in today's departures. Not shown on any of today's police observation reports. Stand by."

"Queer," remarked Haller, taking a long suck and blowing a lopsided smoke-ring. "He couldn't lift it today without getting it marked airborne."

"Maybe he took it yesterday or the day before and parked it here," Steen suggested. Carefully he closed the door of the pilot's cabin, made sure that it was firmly shut. He sat on the edge of the desk, alongside Haller's feet, and waited for the next. It came after ten minutes.

"Dean to Haller. XB109, in charge of Courier Joseph McArd, at Dome City, Luna, refueling for return. Closing channel."

"Impossible!" Haller ejaculated. "*Im*-possible!" He stood up, bit off an inch of cheroot, spat it on the floor. "Somebody's lying." His eyes came level with Steen's and promptly he added, "You?"

"Me?" With a pained expression, Steen also stood up. He was almost chest to chest with the other.

"Either that or the dame gave you a cockeyed number and Grayson was too dopy to detect it in her mind."

"How could Grayson penetrate a mind as flat and blank as a mortuary slab?" inquired Steen.

"He could have told you he was stymied and let you take her over. Where's the point of you going around in pairs if you're too dumb to co-operate?"

"Not dumb," denied Steen.

"Somebody's nursing a month-old mackerel," Haller insisted irritably. "I can smell it. There's something stinky around. Maybe that dame stuffed it up Grayson's vest. He's got the stupefied expression of someone whose best friends have just told him. That's not like Grayson. Go get him. I want to give him a going-over."

"I don't think we need Grayson," said Steen, very softly. "This is just between us two."

"Is it?" Haller's self-command and lack of surprise revealed him as a hard character. "I'd a notion it was you who lied, Steen. I don't know what's come over you, but you'd better not let it go too far."

"No?"

"No! You're a 7M, but what of it? I can burn away your insides some three or four seconds before you can paralyze mine. Moreover, paralysis wears off after a few hours, whereas charring doesn't. It's decidedly permanent."

"I know, I know. That is power, pyrotic power." Steen gestured and his hand touched Haller's, casually, almost accidentally. The hand stuck. Haller tried to pull his own away, found he couldn't. The two hands ad-

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hered at point of contact, like flesh united to flesh, and something was happening at the junction, through the junction. "This, too, is power," said Steen.

VI

FAR beneath the innocuous pile of warehouses belonging to the Transpatial Trading Company there existed a miniature city which, to all intents and purposes, was not part of Earth though situated upon it.

Here were the field headquarters of the Mars-Venus underground movement, its center, its very heart. A thousand beings came and went along cool, lengthy passages and through great cellars, a hand-picked thousand none of whom were men as others are men.

In one cellar worked a dozen slim-fingered oldsters whose eyes were not eyes, but something else, something too short-focused to photograph clearly anything more than three or four inches from the tip of the nose. Yet they were visual organs that within their limits could count the angels dancing on the point of a pin. Mini-engineers, those, who thought nothing of building a seven-year radium chronometer minute enough to serve as the center jewel in a seven-stone ring.

In an adjacent cellar were beings of a different kind, pranksters continually testing their powers on one another with results that produced the craziest results.

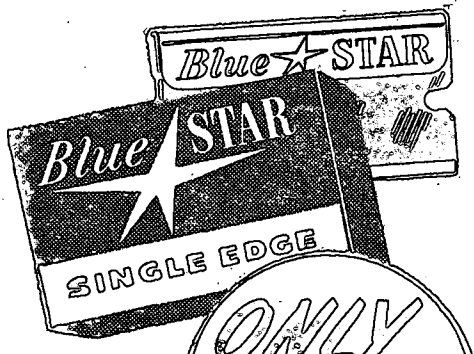
"Silverstone, you're wanted at once down in the signals room. Come on, put a move on."

"I'm moving, aren't I? I'm going to get me a telepath."

A deep sigh. "That's done it! If you first want my mind read, I give in." A swift change of features, altering them out of all resemblance. "There you are. I'm Peters."

[*Turn page*]

A DIME BUYS A DOLLAR'S WORTH OF SHAVING PLEASURE!



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An equally swift and precisely similar change on the part of the other. "That's funny, so am I!"

Two hollow laughs. As alike as twins they sit down and play cards, each surreptitiously watching the other for a moment when a face would forgetfully relax and betray its owner's true identity.

Two more enter, intent on making it a foursome. One registers a moment of intense mental strain, floats clean over the table and takes a chair on the other side. The second glares at a nearer chair which trembles, hesitates, then places itself under him as if shifted by invisible hands.

The second entrant makes his cards leap straight into his ready fingers, grunts as he studies them, says complainingly, "If you two dummies have just *got* to be Peters, let us have different smells so's we'll know who from which." Another grunt. "I pass."

Grayson came into his subterranean menagerie with his mind closed against all intrusions, his eyes alert, suspicious, his manner jumpy. He was in a hurry and had the air of one with reason to fear his own shadow.

AT THE END of a long passage, where it terminated in a heavy steel door, Grayson came face to face with a hypno guard who said, "No further, chum! This is where the boss lives."

"Yes, I know. I want to see Kayder."

"Is it urgent and important?"

"Would I bother him if it wasn't?" Grayson stared back along the passage, made an impatient gesture. "Tell him he'd better hear me before all this blows up under us."

The other eyed him speculatively a moment, as if tempted to put him under the influence and see whether it produced comments more sensible, but something in Grayson's bothered features made him change his mind. Shrugging, he opened a mike trap in the door, spoke into it.

"Chief, Grayson, of Haller's crew, is here. Says it's hot and won't keep."

A voice came back. "I'll give him two minutes."

The guard whispered to Grayson, "It had better be good, he's not full of love today," and opened the door.

A squat, broad-shouldered man with heavily underslung jaw, Kayder was of Venusian birth and probably the only Type Eleven located on Earth. He could converse in low, almost unhearable chirrups with nine species of Venusian bugs, four of them highly poisonous and willing to perform deadly services for friends. Kayder, therefore, enjoyed all the redoubtable power of one with a personal army too vast to destroy.

"Well?" he snapped, glancing up from papers on the bureau. "What is it?"

"You dug up something about this David Raven and ordered that he be brought in."

"I did. I don't know what he's got, but it's alleged to be good. Where have you put him?"

"Nowhere. He got away."

"Not for long," assured Kayder confidently. "I know he is hell-bent for a hideout some place. It will take a little while to dig him out." He waved a hand in dismissal. "Keep on the trail."

"He wouldn't stay in a hideout long," Grayson pointed out. "He might go there for something he needed, but he'd soon be away and jumping around. What good could he do, squatting in a hideout?"

"He could let the hue and cry go past and emerge in his own sweet time. That would be his best technique as one against a crowd—to tackle us in times and places of his own choosing. We musn't give him any chance to do that."

"I've already told you," said Grayson, "that he's been trapped. He was flat on his belly with his tongue hanging out and his sides heaving. A fox right at the last lap. And he got away."

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Kayder rocked back on the hind legs of his chair. "Mean to say you actually had him? You let him slip? How was that?"

"I don't know." Grayson was badly worried. "That's why I've come to see you."

"Be more specific. What happened?"

"We got into his hiding-place. I made a pass at his mind and got a complete blank. It was like feeling around in a vacuum. There was a woman in the house and she was equally resistant. True telepaths, both of them."

"So what? Any average hypno could easily—"

"Steen was with me, as good a hypno as any we've got. Raven made a fool of him."

"Go on, man! Don't stand there enjoying dramatic pauses!"

"Steen gave *me* the treatment," continued Grayson hurriedly and morbidly. "He caught me on one leg and made me marble-minded. He made me go back to the ship and confirm that we'd seen nothing of Raven. Then he went into Haller's cabin."

"What occurred after that?" Kayder's eyes were like icicles.

A small spidery thing scuttled up the leg of his pants. Lowering a casual hand, he got it, helped it onto the bureau. It was thin and bright green, with eight crimson pin-heads for optics.

Distastefully watching this creature, Grayson said, "A few hours later my wits drifted back. By then, Haller was nuts and Steen had disappeared."

"You say Haller was nuts?"

"Yes, he was babbling. Seemed as if his brain had been twisted right round."

"Haller's a pyrotic," Kayder observed. "You are a telepath. Did you overlook those facts? Were you too stupefied by events to remember them?"

"I was not. I took a look inside his skull."

"And what did you find?"

"It was mussed up something awful. His think-stuff was like freshly stirred porridge. He was nursing long chains of pseudo-logic and working through them like prayer beads. Batty. More than ripe for cushioned walls."

"Bad overdose of hypno," diagnosed Kayder. "Haller must have had hypno-allergy. There's no way of telling that until a victim goes loopy. Probably his condition will be permanent."

"Maybe it was accidental. Steen wouldn't know Haller was susceptible. I like to think so."

"That's because you hate to think a pal of yours could or would turn on his friends and get them squinting down their own spines. It's treachery!"

"I don't think so. Raven's got something to do with this," insisted Grayson, doggedly. "Steen wouldn't do the dirty on us without good reason."

"OF COURSE, he wouldn't," agreed Kayder, his features sardonic. He threw several tiny, almost unhearable chirrups at the green spider-thing. It did a bizarre little dance that might have meant something.

Kayder continued, "Every guy has a reason, good, bad or indifferent. I can make a shrewd guess at what's wrong with Steen. He's a low-priced man and Raven found it out."

"Even if he's the sort to be bought over, which I doubt, how could he be? He made no contacts."

"He was alone with Raven, wasn't he?"

"Yes," admitted Grayson. "For less than a couple of minutes, and in the adjoining room with me still listening in. Raven's mind remained blank. Steen's mind said Raven turned casually to face him as if about to say something. Raven touched him—and Steen's mind promptly went blank too. A hypno can't shut off like a telepath—but he did!"

"Ah!" said Kayder, watching him.

"That hit me immediately. It was mighty queer. I got up to see what had

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happened. Then Steen reappeared. I was so relieved that I failed to notice he was still blank. Before I could catch on to that fact, he had me where he wanted me. You don't expect an ally to suddenly thump you on the dome."

"Naturally," endorsed Kayder. He chirruped again at the spider, which obediently moved aside while he reached for his desk mike. "We'll make it a double hunt. We'll have Steen dragged in for examination just as soon as we can lay hands on him."

"You're forgetting something," Grayson offered. "*I'm* here."

Kayder frowned. "What of it?"

"I couldn't get here without knowing how and where." He paused to let it sink in. "Steen knows, too."

"Meaning you think we're due for a raid?"

"Yes."

"I doubt it," said Kayder, calmly pondering the point. "If Terran counterforces had learned of this center and decided to put it out of business, they'd have moved mighty fast. We'd have had our raid hours back."

"What's to stop them biding their time while they make suitable preparations, then blowing us sky-high?"

"You're nervy. There are several things to stop them. First, they'd have to work unsuspected and undetected by us. Second, a blowup would wipe out a known center, leaving them in due time to seek its replacement some place else."

"I suppose so." Grayson was moody, uncertain.

"Third, they've no publicly satisfactory excuse for becoming hard. Officially we're Terrans. Officially there's no war. We're here on legitimate business and can prove it. That gets the Terrans all tied up in a mess of their own contradictions. Until they'll admit what they don't want to admit, we've got 'em where we want 'em."

"I hope you're right."

"You bet I'm right. The Terrans are bogged knee-deep. Heads we win, tails they lose. We're betting on a sure thing."

"Evidently Steen doesn't see it that way," said Grayson pointedly.

"Some people can't see further than a fat wad, providing it's fat enough. I could go blind myself for what's in the national treasury." Kayder sniffed his contempt of those who put their own price too low. He switched his mike, activating it. "D727 Hypno Steen has gone bad on us. Get him at all costs and get him fast!"

Muffled by the heavy door, an outside loudspeaker echoed, "D727 Hypno Steen." Then another, farther away, "D727 Hypno Steen . . . get him fast!"

VII

LEINA sensed Raven's returning. She looked out the window, saw him entering the path. Reaching a decision, she drew away from the curtains. "He's back. I didn't expect him so soon. Something must have gone wrong." She opened the door to the adjoining room. "I can't stay and watch. I just can't!"

"Don't leave me alone with him. I'll try to kill him, even though he kills me. I'll—"

"You'll do nothing. Would you kill your own self? That would be a stupid way to solve your predicament!" She paused, hearing a mental voice call, "Leina!" but not answering. "Remember: implicit obedience."

She went through, closed the door firmly, deliberately. Finding a chair, she seated herself primly erect. Her air was that of a schoolmarm about to witness inexcusable vulgarity.

Someone entered the other room, his mind reaching through the wall, gently nudging her. "It's all right, Leina, you can come out very soon." Then, vocally to the other, "You ready to get back?"

A whisper. "Yes. Oh, heavens, yes!"

"Here, then!"

Leina covered her eyes, though there was nothing visible to hide. A few swift

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little gasps and one small sob came from the next room. They were followed by deep and thankful breathing. She stood up, taut-faced, and went to the door.

"David, I warned you that you shouldn't."

"Was there any other way out you would rather I had taken?" She looked at Steen, who lay, limp and pale, on a pneumatic settee. Moving toward the settee, Raven said, "I took your body, Steen. Even though you are an enemy, I apologize for that. It is not proper to usurp the persons of the living."

"The *living?*" Steen went two shades whiter as he put emphasis on the word. His mind was in a turmoil. "You mean—?"

"Jump to no conclusions," advised Raven, seeing the other's thoughts as clearly as a page of print.

"David," put in Leina, eyeing the window, "what if they come back in greater strength and better prepared?"

"They'll come," he stated, "but not just yet." He resumed with Steen. "They're scouring the world for me, attributing to me an importance I don't possess. Somebody must have given them information to make them so excited. Do you know who gave it?"

"No."

He accepted that without hesitation. "They're hunting for you as well."

"Me?" Steen sat up, trying hard to pull himself together.

"Yes. I made a bitter mistake. I blundered badly by trying to take over your vessel's commander. He was something more than a standard pyrotic. He had intuitive perceptiveness like a rudimentary form of ESP. It enabled him to see or sense or estimate things that he is not entitled to know."

RAVEN glanced sidewise as Leina put a hand to her throat.

"I didn't expect that. It caught me by surprise," he went on. "There's the beginning of a Type Thirteen, a pyrotic with ESP. Probably he doesn't realize

[*Turn page*]

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it himself. He made a frantic snatch at what he thought the only form of self-preservation available by making himself useless to me."

"Meaning?" inquired Steen.

"It was instinctive reaction," Raven continued.

"What's wrong with Haller?" Steen persisted.

"He's whirly," said Raven. "They blame you for that."

"Why pick on me? How could I—"

"Let's put it another way—your body is blamed."

"My body?" echoed Steen, slightly fuddled. "But it wasn't *me!*"

"Try convincing them of that."

"They'll put a telepath on me. He'll read the truth. I can't feed him lies. It's impossible."

"Nothing is impossible. The word ought to be expunged from the language. You could lie all the way from here to Aldebaran if you'd first been conditioned by a hypno more powerful than yourself."

"They wouldn't kill me for that," mused Steen, openly troubled. "But they'd plant me some place safe and for keeps. I'd rather be dead."

Raven chuckled. "You mightn't know it, but you've got something there."

"You're in a sweet position to consider it funny," Steen snapped back. "Who could put *you* in storage when within five minutes you could confiscate a guard and walk out on his legs? Why, you could even carry on from there, go grab the right official and sign an order for your own release. You could . . . you could—" His voice trailed off.

"Beginning to think of us as on the winning side, eh?" Raven shifted his aim to Leina. "Maybe it's just as well that I did take him over."

"I say it's wrong," she responded firmly. "Always has been, always will be."

"I agree with you in principle. Practice is something different. Necessity knows no law. Now and again the end justifies the means." He returned to Steen. "Look, I've not come back for the fun of it. I've a reason, and it concerns you."

"In what way?"

"First of all, are you now willing to play on our side or do you insist on sticking to your own?"

"After this experience," explained Steen, fidgeting uneasily, "I feel that changing sides would be the sensible thing. But I can't do it." He shook a positive head.

"So you remain anti-Terran?"

"No." He shuffled his feet around, avoided the other's gaze. "I won't be anti-Martian or anti-Venusian to please you or anyone else. It goes against the grain. At the same time, I feel that this anti-Terran business is stupid. All I want is to get home, sit tight and be neutral."

"You may have a rough time, trying to sit on the fence," Raven observed. "When parochial hysterics look around for easy marks on whom to vent their spite they usually choose a neutral."

"I'll take my chance on that."

"Have it your own way." Raven nodded toward the door. "There's your road out. The price of freedom is one item of information."

"What do you want to know?"

"Some high-up Terran blatted about me and shoved the news out mighty fast. Someone on our side is a stinker. You've already said you don't know who it is. Who d'you think is likely to know?"

"Kayder," said Steen, mostly because he could not refuse.

"Who's he? Where does he live?"

THAT was easier, not too dangerous. "Where does he *live?*" It enabled him to picture Kayder and his private residence and at the same time to suppress all thoughts of the underground center.

"What's his special talent, if any?" Raven asked, after reading the previous answers.

"I'm not certain of that. I've heard it said he's a bug-talker."

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"That will do me." He jerked an inviting thumb toward the door. "Out you go, and the best of luck."

"I'll need it," Steen admitted. Pausing on the outer step, he added, "And I hope I'll never see either of you again."

"Notice that?" Leina became nervous once more. "A helicopter coming down!" She had a quick and wary look herself. "Falling fast. David, you talked too much and stayed here too long. What are you going to do now?"

He smiled at her. "It seems a woman remains a woman come hell or high water."

"What d'you mean?"

"When you get jumpy, you slide right off the band, or close your receptive circuits or something. It's always best to keep calm. Not everyone is an enemy."

"What are you talking about, David?"

"Listen!" he ordered.

Mastering her emotions, she let her mind reach out. Now that her full attention was turned that way she could detect the overhead jumble of thoughts. There were four personalities in the oncoming machine, their mental impulses growing stronger every second and making no attempt to blank out. Pawn-minds, all of them.

"House looks quiet. Who's that turning out of the path and into the road?"

"Dunno, but it isn't him—too short and lumpy." Pause. "Anyway, Carson said there'd be an outsize Venus here. We can talk to her if we can't find him."

"Hear that?" invited Raven. "You've got an unsuspected admirer—Carson."

"Never met him. You must have been telling him things." She watched the window, continuing to listen. The eerie mind-voices seemed just over the roof.

Dangling from twin circles of light, the thing lowered past the window, pressed its balloon tires into a bed of marigolds. Four men got out, one leaning against the fuselage, three heading for the house. All were in plain clothes.

Meeting them at the door, Raven asked, "What's this? Something urgent?"

"I wouldn't know about that." The leader eyed him up and down. "Yes, you're Raven all right. Carson wants to talk to you." He motioned toward the waiting machine. "We came in this drifter because it carries a security beam. You can speak to him direct from there."

"All right."

"If you'd had a telephone at this place," continued the other, accompanying him toward the helicopter, "he could have called you without this trouble." Thinking again, he added, "No, I guess he wouldn't. Carson doesn't like snoopers."

"He shouldn't, being who he is," agreed Raven. Climbing into the machine, he settled in its cubbyhole, allowed the other to switch the beam for him.

PRESENTLY, the screen livened, glowed, and Carson's features came into it.

"That was quick," he approved. "I've got ten patrols out for you and thought it might take them a week. Searching a world for one man on the loose is a deal tougher than it sounds. What has happened, if anything?"

"Not much," Raven informed. "The opposition has made two fast passes at me. I've made two at them. Nobody has won a battle."

Carson frowned. "That's your end of the poker. Ours is less comfortable. In fact it's white hot."

"In what way?"

"The Dexter United plant went sky-high this ayem. We're keeping the news off the spectroscreens as long as we can."

His hands involuntarily tightening, Raven said, "Dexter's is a big place, isn't it?"

"Big?" Carson took a deep breath. "The overnight shift, which is their smallest, was just ending. That cut down the casualties to four thousand."

"Great heavens!"

"It has the superficial appearance of an accident," Carson went on, his tones

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harsh. "Which means a heck of a lot because every incident is an accident so far as we can tell. We can't tell otherwise until a few traps get sprung."

"Weren't there any in this case?"

"Plenty. Ninety-five per cent of them were blown to kingdom come. The few remaining were too damaged to function or recorded nothing suspicious."

"No survivors?" Raven inquired.

"Not exactly. There were eyewitnesses. You could hardly call them survivors since the nearest of them was a mile from the plant. They say there was a sharp tremor in the ground, a tremendous *whump* and the entire outfit rained around."

Raven said gravely, "According to what you first told me, the opposition's technique has been one of crafty but effective sabotage carried out without spectacular loss of life. If this is another of their jobs, it means a considerable change of sentiment resulting in changed tactics. From now on, life's going to be cheap."

"That is what we fear," endorsed Carson.

Nodding agreement, Raven glanced out of the cubbyhole. "Why call me? Is there a plan you want me to use?"

"No," said Carson. "What you do is entirely up to you. I've given you the information, let you see what it may mean." He emitted a sigh, rubbed his forehead wearily. "Real misfortunes do occur from time to time even in the best regulated communities. Without evidence of some convincing sort, we've no way of telling a real one from a manufactured one."

"You want me to drop everything and look into this?"

Carson's features sharpened. "I don't. Ending this senseless dispute somehow —if it can be ended—is more important than coping, one at a time, with its incidents. I'd rather you went right ahead with whatever you've planned; but I also want you to use any opportunity to dig up data on this blast."

"All right. I'll keep my eyes open and my ears perked. You'll get anything I happen to find." Regarding the other speculatively, Raven added, "Just what was this Dexter plant doing, anyway?"

"You would ask me that!"

"Something secret that I shouldn't be told?"

"Well . . ." He hesitated, went on, "I know of no satisfactory reason why you shouldn't be told. Dexter's were within two months of completing a battery of one dozen new-type engines employing an equally new and revolutionary fuel. A small pilot model, under auto-control, did a return trip to the Asteroid Belt end of last year. Nothing's been said to the public—yet."

"Meaning we're getting set for the big jump?" asked Raven.

"We *were*." Carson displayed a touch of bitterness. "Four triple-engined jobs were going to be aimed at the Jovian system. Moreover, that was to be a try-out, a mere jaunt, only the beginning. If they made it without trouble—" He let his voice die out.

"The others? On to Pluto?"

CARSON repeated, "A jaunt."

"Alpha Centauri?"

"Maybe further than that. It's much too early to estimate the limit, but it's far away, very far." His attention settled on Raven's features. "You don't look particularly excited about it."

"I'm not. It doesn't stir me in the least." Offering no reason for his phlegmatism, he continued, "There's a skewboy around here, a Venusian named Kayder. He operates the Morning Star Trading Company. I'm going to chase him up."

"Kayder," repeated Carson, making notes on a pad not in view. "I'll check with Intelligence. Even though he's legally Terran, they'll have him on file as a native-born Venusian." He finished scribbling, looked up. "All right. Make use of that copter if you need it. Anything else you want?"

"One fertile asteroid," Raven suggested. "For my very own."

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"When we've taken over a few hundreds of them, I'll reserve one for you," promised Carson without smiling. "At the rate we're going it'll be ready for occupation a hundred years after you're dead." The screen went blank.

For a short while Raven sat looking at it absent-mindedly. Faint amusement lay over his lean, muscular features. A hundred years after you're dead, Carson had said. In an era of expansion when strange, space-born aptitudes were piling up rapidly, would unparalleled longevity be considered a mutation symptom? Or what about imperviousness to destruction at human hands?

"*Human* hands, David," broke in Leina's mind-stream, coming from the house. "Remember that! Always remember that!"

"It is impossible to forget," he gave back.

She shared with him a mutual function, willingly accepted, willingly faced. It must always be remembered, though, never mentioned. Leina feared neither man nor beast, light nor dark, life nor death. Her anxieties stemmed from only one source: she was afraid of loneliness, the utter loneliness of one with an entire world to herself.

VIII

KAYDER came home as twilight surrendered to dark, dumped his sportster on the rear plot, watched two men stow it in its little hangar. They fastened the sliding door, joined him as he walked to the back door of the house.

"Late again," he grumbled. "The cops are jumpy tonight. Swarming all over the sky. I was stopped three times." He sniffed his contempt.

"Something must have happened," ventured one. "Though there's been nothing out of the ordinary on the spectroscreens."

"Never is," remarked the second. "Three weeks have gone by and still they've not admitted that raid on—"

"Sh-h-h!" Kayder jogged him with a heavy elbow. "How many times do I have to tell you to keep it buttoned?"

Let There Be Light

THE ELECTRIC LIGHT BULB and the fluorescent tube are on their way out. Fluorescents, brand new yesterday, are already obsolete. The latest thing is a method of treating large panels of glass so that entire walls or ceilings will become softly luminous. The new system, called electroluminescence, will provide a glareless, even light as contrasted with the glare from a single spot of concentrated light. Already in the state of practical planning is a clock with self-illuminated face. The applications are endless. And so by one more step do we approach the science-fiction writer's fantasy, wherein the walls of the future's houses glowed with their own cool light!

Unlocking the door, he went in, warmed his hands at a thermic panel. "What's for dinner?"

"Venus duck with roasted—"

The door-gongs made sonorous reverberations. Kayder shot a sharp look at the taller of the two.

"Who's that?"

The other's mind reached toward the front, came back. He said, "Fellow named David Raven."

Kayder sat down. "You sure of that?"

"It's what his mind says."

"What else does it say?"

"Nothing. Only that his name is David Raven. The rest is blank."

"Delay him a few seconds, then show him in."

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Reaching to a desk, Kayder hurriedly pulled out a drawer, took from it a small, ornamented box of Venusian bogwood. He flipped its lid upward. Beneath lay a thick pad of purplish leaves mixed with dry spike-shaped blossoms. Scattered lightly over the center of this pad was what appeared to be the merest pinch of common salt.

He chirruped at the box. Promptly the tiny, glistening grains moved, swirled around.

"He knows you're keeping him waiting and why," the tall man pointed out. "He can snatch it straight out of your brain."

"Let him. What can he do about it?" Kayder poked the box across the desk and nearer the facing chair. A few shining specks soared out of it. "You worry too much, Santil. You telepaths are all alike." He chirped again. More living motes went up, circled, spun into invisibility. "Show him in."

SANTIL was plainly glad to get out. So was his companion. So far as they were concerned, when Kayder started playing around with his boxes the best place was elsewhere.

Their attitude gratified Kayder. It enhanced his sense of personal power. Superiority over pawns is a thing worth having, but to rise above those with redoubtable talents of their own is greatness indeed.

Automatically, the professional smile of a trader welcoming big business suffused his features as Raven entered. He pointed to a chair, was silent while he weighed up the black, glossy hair, the wide shoulders, narrow hips. Collar ad model, he decided, except for those silver-flecked eyes. They looked too far, penetrated too deep.

"They do," said Raven, without expression. "Very deep."

In no way disconcerted, Kayder gave back, "I'm not jumpy, see? I've had too many mind-pickers around me too long. I've been looking for you."

"So nice of me to come," Raven suggested. "What's the motive?"

"I wanted to know what you've got." Kayder would much rather have stalled over that, and offered something deceptive. But, as he had remarked, he was accustomed to telepaths. When your mind is as wide open as the spectro-screen's Sunday color-strips the only thing you can do is admit what's on it. "I'm led to believe you're extra-special."

"Who led you?" Raven watched him keenly.

Kayder gave a grating laugh. "You ask me when you can read it in my mind?"

"It isn't in your mind. Maybe a hypno dutifully eliminates it for you every now and again, as a safety measure. If so, something can be done about that. A stamp can be erased, but not the impression beneath it."

"For somebody extra-special you lag behind in the matter of wits," Kayder opined. "What a hypno can do, another and better hypno can undo. When I want to keep something right out of my mind I can dig up better and more effective ways."

"Such as?"

"Such as not taking it into my mind in the first place."

"Meaning you get information from an unknown source?"

"Of course. I asked for it to be kept from me. The best mind-picker this side of creation can't extract what isn't there."

"An excellent precaution," approved Raven, peculiarly pleased with it. He swiped at something in midair, swiped again.

"Don't do that!" Kayder ordered, registering a sudden scowl.

"Why not?"

"Those marsh-midges are mine."

"That doesn't entitle them to whine around my ears." He smacked hands together, wiped out a couple of them. The rest sheered away like a tiny dust cloud. "Besides, there are plenty more where these came from."

Rayder stood up, his face dark.

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In harsh, threatening tones, he said, "Those midges can do mighty unpleasant things to a man. They can make his legs swell until each is thicker than his body. The swelling creeps up. He becomes one immense elephantine bloat, utterly incapable of locomotion."

"Interesting though sordid," commented Raven, cool and undisturbed. "How nice to know I'm unlikely to be the subject of their attentions."

"What makes you think that?" Kayder beetled black brows at him.

"Several items. For example, what information are you going to get out of me when I'm bloated and buried?"

"None, but I won't need it when you're dead."

"An excusable error on your part, my friend. Sit down and compose yourself. Think of the consequences of bloating me. Nobody but a Venusian insectivocal could arrange such an end. So far as we know, you're the only one on this planet."

"I am," admitted Kayder with a touch of pride.

"That narrows the suspects, doesn't it? Terran Intelligence takes one look at the body and plants a finger straight on you. They call it murder. They've a penalty for that."

GLANCING at the dust cloud, Kayder gave a sharp laugh. "That's supposing there is a body for Intelligence to brood over. But what if there's not?"

"There won't be a body. I'll arrange for it to be disintegrated and thus tidy things up a bit."

"*You* will arrange it? Mister, we're talking about your corpse, not mine."

"Are we?" Raven's smile was knowingly skeptical.

Kayder pressed a button on his desk. Santil opened the door, edged partway through.

"You heard anything?" Kayder demanded.

"No."

"Have you been trying?"

"Of course. It was no use. I got your mind only."

"All right. You may go." Kayder watched the door close. "So you're a new kind of telepath, an armored mind-probe, one who can pick without being picked. That confirms what Grayson told me."

"Grayson," echoed Raven. He gave a careless shrug. "He who is only half-informed is ill-informed. I'd like to learn who organized the Dexter blow-up."

"Huh?"

"They suffered a big blast. It was bad, really bad."

"Well, what's that to me?"

"Nothing," admitted Raven, deeply disappointed.

There was good cause for discontent. A rush of thoughts had poured through Kayder's mind in four seconds flat, and Raven had perceived every one of them.

A big blow-up at Dexters? Where do I come in? What's he getting at? Putting that huge dump out of action would be something of a master stroke but we haven't got round to it yet. Could it be that those itchy Martians have started pulling fast ones of their own? I don't trust those Martians overmuch.

Raven commented, "I doubt whether you trust anyone or anything except, perhaps, these bugs of yours." His attention went to the still-swirling cloud, seeming to have no trouble in distinguishing and identifying every individual within it. "Some day even those will let you down if only because bugs must always be bugs."

"When you talk about insects you're talking to an authority," said Kayder irritably. He glowered straight ahead. "You've read all my thoughts. I can't blank them out like a 1M, and therefore they've been wide open to you. So you know that this Dexter affair is no business of mine."

"I give you that. At hour back I'd have bet heavily on your being the guilty party and I'd have lost. Thanks

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for saving my money."

"You must need it. How much did you pay Steen?"

"Nothing. Not a button."

"D'you expect me to believe that?"

"Like everyone else, Steen can stand only so much," Raven told him. "You'd better write Steen off as a case of battle fatigue."

"He'll be dealt with in due course," promised Kayder, lending it menace. "What did you do to Haller?"

"Not so much. Trouble with him is that he's overeager. He'll be dead within a week."

"Did you say *dead?*"

"Yes." Studying him with cold amusement, Raven asked, "What's wrong with that? It's not so long since you yourself were openly gloating over what I'd look like after your bugs had been to work on me. You enjoyed death then, didn't you?"

"I can enjoy it right now," Kayder assured. His thin, mobile lips took on a peculiar twist.

The telephone on his desk yelped, almost as if in protest of what was on his mind. He snatched it up. "Well?"

It chattered metallically against his ear. Finally, he racked it, leaned back in his seat, wiped his forehead. "Haller has done it," he informed. "They say he babbled some crazy stuff about bright-eyed moths that fly through the dark. Then he put himself down for keeps."

"Was he married?"

"No."

"Then it's of little consequence." Raven casually dismissed it as if it were a minor incident. "It was to be expected. He was overeager."

"What d'you mean by that?"

"Never mind. All I will tell you is this: in the same circumstances, you would stand before me and joyfully cut your own throat from ear to ear, laughing as you did it."

"Like heck I would!" Kayder pointed a finger. "We've met each other. I've got all I want out of you, which is that as something super-super you bear a strong resemblance to a flat tire. There's the way out."

"Think as you please." Raven's smile was calm and disturbingly cool. "All I wanted of you was something on this Dexter case. I'm not interested in anything else. Intelligence can tend to it."

"Bah!" Putting out a hand, Kayder emitted inviting chirrups. Whirling motes descended and settled on his open palm. "The Intelligence has mooched behind me for months. So what? I'm a Terran, engaged in legitimate business, and nothing can be proved against me.

"Not yet," qualified Raven, going to the door. "But remember those bright-eyed moths that Haller mentioned." Opening the door, he went out, glanced back through and finished, "Thanks for all that stuff on your underground base."

"What?" Kayder dropped the box, midges and all.

"Don't reproach yourself or the hypno who expunges it from your mind every time you leave the place. He made a good, thorough job of it—there wasn't a trace. But it made a detailed and beautiful picture in friend Santil's mind." Raven slammed the door.

Kayder pulled out a mike, switched it on. His voice was hoarse with suppressed fury. "Get on the jump and shoot this around: an Intelligence raid is due shortly. Number one cover-up plan to operate at once. Number two plan to be prepared in readiness. David Raven is now on the run from this address. Put him out of business any way you can. That's top priority—get Raven!"

THE DOOR opened and Santil came in saying, "Look, he caught me napping in a way that I—"

"Idiot!" interjected Kayder, bristling at the sight of him. "Of all the mentally gabby dopes you take the biscuit!"

"He was blank, see?" protested San-

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til, flushing. "When you're born and bred a telepath you can't help becoming conditioned by it. You know that a blank mind can only be that of another telepath or someone who's been treated by a hypno. You just naturally assume that while he remains blank he cannot listen. I forgot that this fellow could still feel around while mentally deader than a dead dog."

"You forgot," jibed Kayder. "It's top of the list of famous last words: 'I forgot.'" His irate gaze shifted to a large, mesh-covered box standing in one corner. "If those hornets were able to recognize individuals I could have him stripped down to his skeleton no matter how far he's got."

Sourly, he took up the telephone, dialed, said, "You, Dean? Put those emergency pips on the air. Yes, I want the-man-we-don't-know. If he phones back, tell him Raven's likely to put a finger on local base. Ask him to use his influence either to postpone or minimize a raid." Racking the instrument, he glowered at the door.

"If he's got a good range he'll have overheard that," Santil pointed out.

"That's taken for granted." The phone shrilled once more, and he picked it up with an air of expectation. "Murray here," announced the voice at the other end. "You sent me to dig up stuff on this Raven."

"What have you got?"

"Not so much. I'd say the Terrans are becoming desperate, scouring the planet and making wild guesses."

"You're making one or two of your own," snapped Kayder. "Give me what you've got and leave the guessing to this end of the line."

"His father was a pilot on the Mars run, an exceptionally efficient 1M coming from four telepathic generations. There was no mixing of talents, maritally speaking, until Raven's parents met."

"Go on."

"The mother was a radiosensitive with an ancestry of radiosensitives plus one supersonic. According to Professor Hartman, the end product of such unions would most likely inherit only the dominant talent and the odd exception should amount to no more than an abnormal widening of telepathic range into the longer band."

"He's wrong there. This skewboy can pull others in even while he's holding them off."

"I wouldn't know about that," evaded Murray. "I'm only telling you what Hartman says."

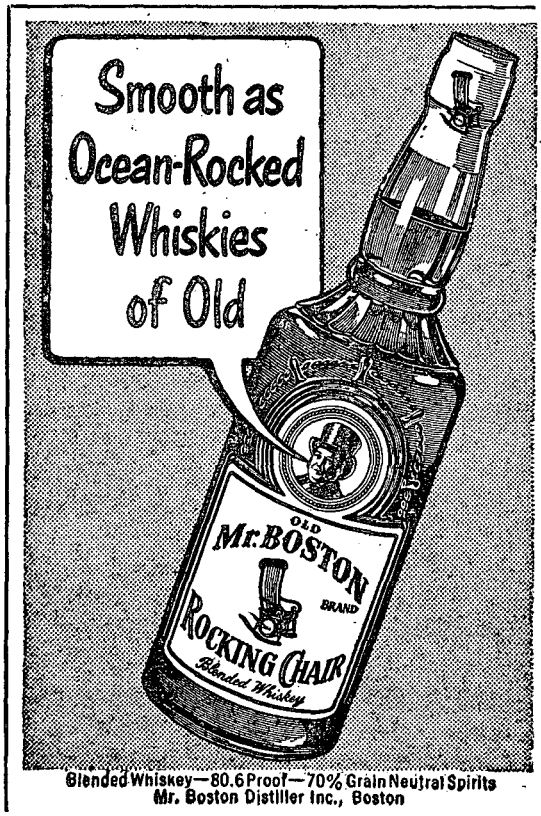
"Never mind. Let's have the rest."

"Raven followed in Pappy's footsteps by getting his Mars pilot certificate and thus holds the space-rank of captain. That's as far as he went. He's never taken a ship toward Mars."

"H'm! That's strange." Kayder frowned with thought. "Any reason that you could discover?"

"Maybe he feels that his health won't

[*Turn page*]



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stand for any Mars trips," hazarded Murray. "Not since he was killed."

"Eh?" Kayder's back hairs stiffened. "Say that again."

"He was at the space port when the old *Rimfire* exploded like a bomb ten years back. It wrecked the control tower and did some slaughter, remember?"

"Yes, I saw it on the spectroscreens."

"Raven was picked up, definitely one of the dear departed. Some young doc played with the body, just on a whim. He brought him back. It was one of those occasional returned-from-the-grave cases." Murray paused, added thoughtfully, "Since then, I reckon he's lost his nerve."

Kayder pronged the phone, leaned back. "Lost his nerve? Bunkum! From what I saw of him he never had any to lose in the first place."

"Who's this you're talking about?"

"Shut up and let me think." A spider-thing crept out of his pocket, blinking around. Putting it on the desk, he let it play with his finger tip while he mused aloud.

"Raven had a funny attitude toward death. He guessed Haller would do the dutch about ten minutes before it happened. That's because it takes one nut to recognize another. It also shows that his own narrow escape has left him queer in the head. He tried it once and it wasn't so bad—just like sleep." His attention moved from the spider to Santil. "His death data are so unusual that he makes loony computations upon it. You see what it means?"

"What?"

"Unlimited, foolhardy, crackpot courage. He's a telepath better than average and with the mental attitude of a religious fanatic. One taste of death has killed his fear of it. That makes him totally unpredictable."

SOMETHING went pip-pip-pip under the floor. Pulling open a drawer, he took from it another and much smaller telephone, and held it up to his ear.

"Kayder."

"Ardern here. The raid is on."

"How's it going?"

"Hah! It'd give you a very big laugh. The hypnos are weighing and bagging tree-almonds; the mini-engineers are assembling ladies' watches; the teleports are printing the news-from-Venus sheet and acting like they're all being good at school. The entire place is happy, peaceful, innocent."

"Get the blanking done in time?"

"Most of it. We had to boost the last six through the chute, but they got away all right."

"Good," said Kayder with satisfaction.

"That's not all. You've put out a call for a smoothie named Raven?"

"Yes, I have. I want him—and fast."

"Well, we've got him."

Kayder sucked in his breath with a low hiss that made the spider jump. He soothed it with a finger.

"You sure of that?"

"Positive! He's Raven without a shadow of doubt."

"How'd you manage to nail him down?"

"No trouble at all. He walked into the cage, locked the door on himself, hung his identity-card on the bars and yelled for us to come and look at him."

IX

KAYDER made it in four minutes, one under the promised time. The unpretentious house to which he went was the terminal of the secret chute from underground base.

The man waiting for him was small and thin and had features permanently yellowed by past spells of valley fever. He was a floater with a bad limp acquired in his youth when once he overdid the altitude.

"Well?" demanded Kayder, staring around the room. "Where is he?"

"Raven?"

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"Of course."

"He's aboard the *Fantôme,*" informed Ardern.

"I thought you said we'd got him." Kayder's ire started to rise. "What d'you mean by giving me that stuff over the phone about having him caged?"

"So he is," Ardern insisted. "As you well know, the *Fantôme* is a homeward boat about to blow for Venus."

"With a Terran crew. They're always Terrans."

"What of it? Neither he nor they can get up to any funny tricks in space. They've got to land. This Raven will then be on our own planet. What more could you want?"

"I wanted him myself."

Ardern registered surprise. "You didn't say so. Besides, you'd already had him yourself. You told as much when you put out that call. I took it for granted the reason was that after he left, you'd got a message from home ordering you to take his head off."

"There's been no message." Going to the window, Kayder gazed through the dark at a string of distant green lights that marked the local spaceport. "That her over there?"

"Yes." Ardern limped across to join him.

"He must have moved mighty fast." Kayder consulted his wristwatch. "Scarcely half an hour since he left."

"A police copter took him."

"How did you discover he was on board?"

"Easy as pie," said Ardern. "I was by the gangway when this fellow came from the copter, gave the checker his name as David Raven, claimed a cabin. I thought to myself, 'That's the guy Kayder's shouting for,' whereupon he turned, grinned at me like an alligator grinning at a naked swimmer and said, "You're dead right!' " He shrugged, added, "So, of course, I beat it to the nearest phone and told you."

"He's got enough impudence to serve a dozen," Kayder growled. "Does he think he's armor-plated or something?" He paced rapidly to and fro, afflicted with indecision. "Who's on her that we know?"

"Too late to get a complete passenger list. She carries some three hundred. Pity we can't search through the lot and pick out the skewboys. Only ones I know are twelve of our own men returning for fourth-year leave."

"What types are they?"

ARDERN replied, "Ten mini-engineers and two teleports."

"An ideal combination of talent to send a pinhead exploder through his keyhole and smear him across his bed," said Kayder with heavy sarcasm. "Bah! He'd read every intention the moment it jelled and be twenty jumps ahead of them all the way."

"He has to sleep," ventured Ardern.

"How do we know that? Nocturnals don't sleep."

"Tell you what, there's still radio contact so let's get those twelve to rake the ship for a homeward-bound telepath. They could then enlist his help."

"No use," Kayder scoffed. "Raven can make his mind feel like a chunk of marble." Kayder returned his attention to the far-off green lights. "Sometimes I get fed up with our array of talent. Bugs are best. Nobody can read a bug's mind. Nobody can hypnotize a bug. But bugs obey only those whom they love and that is that."

"I once saw a pyrotic burn a thousand of them."

"Indeed? What happened afterward?"

"Ten thousand came and killed him."

"There you are," said Kayder with satisfaction. "Bugs—you can't beat 'em."

He said, "Nothing for it but to pass the buck. We'll let them handle him at the other end. If an entire world can't cope with one not-so-hot skewboy we might as well give up right now."

"That's what I said in the first place," Ardern pointed out. "He's caged himself."

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"Maybe he has and maybe he hasn't. I'll give them the tip to expect him. They'll meet the boat coming in and—"

His voice cut off as the distant green lights were suddenly outshone by a vivid shaft of white fire which crawled upward from ground level and increased speed until eventually it was spearing into the heavens. A deep roaring noise made the windows rattle.

"There he goes. Being on the ship he's stuck with it until he arrives into our waiting arms."

Ardern screwed up his yellow face and looked vaguely bothered. "I've just thought of something."

"What?"

"I had to leave the gangway to go to the phone."

"And so?"

"How do we know he's actually on that boat? He's had all the time in the world to walk off it again."

"Could be," admitted Kayder, frowning. "He's artful enough for it. But we can check up quite easily. Are those snoops out of the base yet?"

"I'll see." Ardern flipped a tiny wall switch, spoke into the aperture above it. "Who's there?"

"Philby," responsed a voice.

"Those Intelligence characters still messing around?"

"They're just gone."

"Fine! I'm coming along with Kayder to—"

"Don't know what's so fine about it," interrupted Philby. "They took eight of our fellows with them."

"Were those eight properly blanked?" Kayder chipped in.

"You bet they were."

"Then why should we worry? Let's deal with one thing at a time and get in touch with the *Fantôme*."

The receiver's big screen cleared, showed the features of a dark-haired, alert individual with a chest mike hanging from his neck. The *Fantôme's* operator.

"Name, please," demanded the operator.

"Arthur Kayder. I want to talk to—"

"Kayder?" put in the operator. "We've a passenger waiting to speak to you."

"Hah!" murmured Ardern, nudging Kayder. "One of our boys has got him spotted."

Before Kayder could say anything, the operator's face flashed off the screen and another came on. It was Raven's.

"Good evening, Louse-ridden." His smile was impudent.

"You!" Kayder glowered at him.

"Me in person. As you can see for yourself I am really and truly on board."

"You'll be sorry," Kayder promised.

"Meaning at the other end? I know that your next move will be to tell them I'm coming. You'll get on the spaceband and warn a world." He chuckled. "I can't help but find it most flattering, Bugsy."

"Don't call me Bugsy!" Kayder shouted, his broad features dark red.

"Temper, temper!" Raven chided. "If your looks could kill, I'd drop dead right now."

"You're going to do it anyway," Kayder bawled. "*I'll* see to that!"

"Sweet of you to say so." Raven eyed him a moment, then said very deliberately, "Better put your affairs in order as best you can. You may be away quite a spell." He switched off.

CUTTING the set with a savage flip of his thumb, Kayder turned to Ardern. "What's he mean about me going away? I don't get it."

"Me neither."

They let it stew in their minds until Philby came along and said, "There's a call waiting from you-don't-know-who."

Kayder took the phone, listened.

The familiar but unknown voice rasped, "I've more than enough on my plate without taking unnecessary risks to rescue loud-mouthed blabs."

"Huh?" Kayder blinked at the instrument.

"Homicidal threats over an open

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transmission system with half the Intelligence listening-in," went on the voice, acid-toned. "Under Terran law the penalty is up to five years in the jug. They can pin it on you beyond my power to unpin. There's nothing you can do but get out fast. Take the *Fantôme* and don't come back."

"She jumped ten minutes ago," said Kayder, feeling futile.

"That's your hard luck. Get out of that base. You mustn't be found there. And don't go home either."

"But my army is there. With them I could—"

"You could not," corrected the voice. "Because you won't be given the chance. Don't argue with me. Get out of sight and lie low as best you can."

"I can fight the charge," Kayder pleaded.

"Look," came back the voice, wearily, "the Intelligence Service *wants* to tie you down. Now you've given them the chance, they'll tie you well and truly."

The other went off. Kayder lugubriously cradled the phone, stared around as though lost for suitable comment.

"What's the matter?" asked Ardern, watching him.

"They're going to try lug me in for up to five years."

"Why?"

"Threatening murder."

"Holy smoke!" Ardern backed away, limping. "They can do it, too, if they set their minds on it." His features became curiously strained, his body appeared to lengthen itself, then his feet left the ground and he soared toward a ceiling shaft. "I'm going. You're a complete stranger to me." He soared up the shaft.

Kayder went out, walked the streets and back alleys until two in the morning. Then he slunk along the darker side of a square and four men emerged from a black archway, barred his path.

One of them, a telepath, spoke with authoritative assurance. "You're Arthur Kayder. We want you."

X

YELLOW and thick the great crawling mists of Venus pressed against the forepeak ports when Raven went into the main cabin for a look at the radar screen.

A constant shuddering went through the entire length of the *Fantôme* as its power plants strove to cope with their most difficult task, namely, the relatively slow maneuvering of a giant structure primarily designed for superfast motion. It was not easy. It was never easy.

All passengers likewise recognized that this was the critical stage. The inveterate card players became tense and still; the chatterers turned silent; the *tambar* drinkers were cold sober. In a flat, unemotional voice an officer in the forepeak was reciting over the loudspeaker system, "One-forty thousand, one-thirty-five, one-thirty thousand."

[*Turn page*]

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Undisturbed, Raven watched the screen and bided his time. The mountains passed center, moved to base, drifted off the screen. Presently the oval edge of the great plain was revealed, became clearer, more detailed, streaked with broad rivers. Vibration was now violent as the ship fought to hold its tonnage in near balance with the planet's grip and come down still more slowly.

"Twenty thousand, nineteen-five hundred."

Several stared at Raven as he got up from his seat and left the cabin. Ignoring them, he walked rapidly forward along a metal corridor until he reached the starboard airlock. This, he decided, was as good a time as any. The crew had their hands full; the passengers were preoccupied with the safety of their own skins.

He was smiling to himself as he operated the automatic door, stepped into the lock, and closed the door behind him. That action would light a crimson telltale in the control room, and soon somebody would hotfoot along to see who was fooling with the exit facilities. No matter. Any irate official would be at least half a minute too late.

Swiftly he released the seals of the outer door, unwound it, opened it wide. None of the ship's air went out but some higher-pressure Venusian air pushed in, bringing with it warmth, dampness and strong odors of mass vegetation.

Somebody started hammering and kicking on the inner door, doing it with the outraged vigor of authority successfully defied. At the same time the loudspeaker clicked, changed voices and spoke sharply.

"You in Airlock Four, close that outer door and open the inner. You are warned that operation of the locks by any unauthorized person is a serious offense punishable by—"

WAVING a sardonic good-by to the loudspeaker, Raven leaped out. He plunged headlong into thick, moist air, fell swiftly with many twists and turns. At one instant the *Fantôme* was a long black cylinder flaming high above him; the next there was a whirling world of trees and rivers rushing up to meet him.

Only two kinds of people jumped out of space-ships: suicides and fugitive floaters. The latter invariably used their supernormal power to drift down at a leisurely rate. They dared not do otherwise. Suicides fell like stones.

Raven was still five hundred feet above the tree tops when the *Fantôme* had become a foreshortened, pencil-sized vessel about to land just over the horizon. It was then that Raven slowed in midair.

The slowing was a curious phenomenon, having nothing in common with the taut-faced, mind-straining deceleration of an accomplished floater. The sudden decrease of his rate of fall occurred casually, naturally, somewhat in the manner of a dropping spider that changes its mind and pays out its line less rapidly.

At tree-top height, still some three hundred and fifty feet above the ground, he was descending as if dangling from an invisible parachute. Between huge top branches as thick as the trunks of adult Earth trees he went down like a drifting leaf, slowed again, hit the ground with just enough force to leave his heel marks in the turf.

This point was little more than a mile from the rim of the great plain. The immense trees grew more widely apart here with quiet, cathedral-like glades between them.

The news of his jump would gall the deputation waiting at the spaceport, but it would not fool them for a moment. Kayder's message—assuming they had got it—would tag him as a telepathic oddity, a kind of 1aM to whom Terran characters like Heraty and Carson attributed greater importance than apparently he deserved.

Now, they'd face the fact that he had left the ship like a levitator but had not gone down like a levitator. Despite his

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free and seemingly helpless fall, not one of them would believe that he had made his leap for the sheer pleasure of breaking his neck. Without hesitation they would now accept the existence of some new and previously unsuspected quasi-levitative talent and adding that to what they already knew he had got, would classify him as the first example of a creature often postulated and greatly feared: the multitalented offspring of mixed mutants.

The notion of a supertelepathic superlevitator was patently absurd, but the opposition would swallow the absurdity without a blink when it came along carefully disguised as a self-evident fact. They would want him badly, and quickly, before he started playing hob with other laws greatly esteemed because they were profitable in terms of cash or power.

The big laugh was on them, and it was a pity they would never know it because there are facts of life not told to the immature.

No natural laws had been or could be abolished.

There were no multitalented humans.

There were only bright-eyed moths that dexterously swoop and soar through the endless reaches of the dark.

He sent out a powerful, tight-beamed mind call far below the normal telepathic band. "Charles!"

"Yes, David?" It came back promptly as if the other had been listening in expectation of the summons. The mental impulses registered in twin receiving centers and proved slightly out of phase.

Raven turned to face the other's direction as automatically as a pawn would turn to look at another.

"I ducked out of the ship. Doubt whether it was necessary but thought I'd play safe."

"Yes, I know," came back the distant mind. "Mavis got a call from Leina. They gabbled an hour about personal things before Leina remembered she'd come through to tell us you were on the *Fantôme*. It seems she'd rather you kept to your proper job."

"Females remain female through the whole of eternity," Raven offered.

"So I went to the spaceport," Charles continued, "and I'm outside it right now. Can't get in because it's barred to the public and heavily guarded." He paused, then commented, "Why come on a ship, anyway? If for some mysterious reason you had to do it the slow way, couldn't you have inflated a small balloon and drifted here?"

"Occasionally there are considerations more important than speed," said Raven. "I'm wearing a body, for instance."

"It's precisely your body they'll be seeking. It's a giveaway."

"Maybe, but it is what I want them to seek. Looking for a body will stop them from getting ideas."

"You know best," Charles conceded. "Are you coming to our place?"

"Of course. I called to make sure you'd be there."

"We will. See you shortly, eh?"

"I'm starting right now."

Forthwith he set off through the shadowed glades toward the plain, striding swiftly along and keeping watch more with his mind than with his eyes.

AT the fringe of the trees he received the first evidence of search. He stood in the darkness by a mighty bole while a copter floated just over the great umbrella of top branches. It was a big machine, carrying a crew of ten. Their minds could be counted as they probed the thick greenery beneath. There were a half dozen telepaths listening, eager to catch any stray mental impulse he might be careless enough to let loose.

This entire menagerie passed right above and zigzagged onward, blissfully unaware of his existence. A similar outfit was scouring a wide path on a roughly parallel course two miles to the south, and yet another two miles northward.

He let them get well behind him before he stepped into the open and followed

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the outskirts of the trees until he struck a dirt road. Once upon the highway he felt less wary.

These flying search parties might be composed of exceptional humans well above pawn standard, but they still tended to fall into pawn errors: such as taking it for granted that anyone casually strolling in plain sight could have nothing to hide.

There was still the risk, though a slight one, that a clear record of his features might be in circulation and a hunter drop low enough to identify him.

But nobody showed above-average curiosity until he got within a short distance of Plain City. At that point a copter drifted immediately overhead, and he felt four minds spiking into his own. For their pains they were rewarded with pictures of a sordid and decidedly boring domestic wrangle.

Just outside the city's rim he stepped off the road to make way for a ponderous tractor that was dragging a steel-barred trailer. Two hypnos and one teleport were in charge of this belated addition to the chase, the chief feature of which was represented by a score of drooling tree-cats in the trailer. The latter could follow a spoor one week old and literally sprint up the trunk of any forest giant not smothered in spikes.

As became a pawn, Raven chewed a piece of purplish grass and stared dull-eyed as this lot creaked and rumbled past. The minds of the whole bunch were like open books. One of the hypnos was coddling a *tambar* hangover, the other missing a night's sleep and frequently pinching himself to keep alert.

On they clanked down the road, a futile cavalcade made doubly absurd by the mock-dopy watch of its quarry. Probably by the fall of dark they would catch and tear to bloody shreds a rare jungle hobo or an illicit *tambar* distiller, and return flushed with success.

Raven's smile was bitter.

Going into the city, Raven found his way to a small granite house with brilliant orchids behind its windows. There was no difficulty about finding it, although he had never been here before.

When he arrived he did not have to knock. Those waiting within had measured his every step and knew the moment he was there.

XI

MAVIS, petite, blond and blue-eyed, seated herself in a deep chair, folded her hands in her lap and gazed at Raven with the same deep penetration that his own eyes sometimes showed to the considerable discomfort of others.

The other, Charles, was a plump and rather pompous little man blessed with the lackluster optics of a pawn. Any talented human would take one look at Charles and classify him as a nitwit. More by good luck than good management, Charles was an entity exceptionally well concealed and therefore a little to be envied.

"Naturally we are very pleased to see you," said Mavis, speaking vocally and with her mind shut tight. "But what has happened to the rule that one stays put on one's appointed ball?"

"Circumstances alter cases," Raven retorted. "Besides, Leina is still there. She can handle anything."

Charles squatted comfortably with pudgy legs stretched out, nursed his paunch. "According to Leina, you are busily sticking your fingers into other people's affairs. Is that right?"

"About half right." Raven studied him speculatively a moment. "Someone on this planet, aided by unknown co-operators on Mars, is having a good time pulling Terra's hair. They are like mischievous children playing with a gun, not thinking that it might be loaded."

"H'm!" Charles thoughtfully rubbed a pair of chins. "We know there's a strong nationalist movement on this particular lump of dirt but we've ignored it as being of no especial interest from our viewpoint. Even if they go so far as to murder each other wholesale,

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what does it matter? It's all to the merry, isn't it?"

"In one way it is. In another, it isn't."

"Meaning?"

"The Terrans are badly in need of unity because they are heading toward the Denebs."

"They're heading—" Charles' voice tailed off. Momentarily, his dull eyes revealed hidden fires. "Are you telling me that Terran authorities actually *know* about the Denebs? How the deuce *can* they know?

"Because," said Raven, patiently, "they are now at development stage four. They've got a better drive, have already tried it out, are about to test it further and are unable to prophesy its limits. They've found enough to arouse suspicions that sooner or later they are going to collide with some other unnamed, undescribed life form. You know and I know that can only be the Denebs." He wagged an emphatic finger. "We also know that the Denebs have long been milling around like a pack of hounds with fifty trails to follow and that their general trend is in this direction."

QUITE undisturbed, Mavis put in, "That is true. However, the last prognosis gave them a minimum of two centuries to find this system."

"A conclusion based on data then available," said Raven. "We have a new and very weighty item now, namely, that Homer Saps is rushing out to meet them."

"Have you reported this?" demanded Charles.

"Most certainly."

"And what was the response?"

"Thanks for the information."

"Nothing more than that?" Charles lifted an eyebrow.

"Nothing," assured Raven. "What more did you expect?"

"Something less phelgmatic and more emotional," Mavis interjected. "You males are all the same: cold and calculating. Why can't you stand on a table and scream like a woman?"

"Would it do any good?" asked Charles.

"It would take some pleasure off the glands. I've got a few glands, in case you don't know."

"That is a subject about which I am passably informed," said Charles. "I have glands myself. One of them makes me fat and inclined to laziness. I appear to lack the one that is bothering you at the moment." He pointed a plump digit. "There's the table. Climb up and let go a few shrill bellows. We won't mind."

"I am not in the habit of bellowing," said Mavis acidly.

"There you are." He threw a glance at Raven and gave a fatalistic shrug. "Women . . . cold and calculating. . . can't take the steam off their zip-bits."

"A day will come when I'll trim your wings a bit, Porky," Mavis promised.

"Fancy me with wings." Charles laughed until his paunch trembled. "What an imagination!"

Producing a tiny, lace-edged handkerchief, Mavis began to weep into it, very softly and quietly.

Charles stared at her aghast. "Well, what have I said now?"

"You voiced a stimulator," Raven told him. He went to Mavis, gently patted her shoulder. "It isn't right to remain when memories have become too much for you and you want out. We can find another pair who—"

She whipped down the handkerchief and said fiercely, "I don't want out. Can't a girl cry if she wants to?"

"Sure she can, but—"

"Forget it." She stuffed the handkerchief into a pocket, blinked a couple of times, smiled at him. "I'm all right now."

"Does Leina ever do that?" asked Charles, looking at Raven.

"Not while I'm around."

"Leina was older when . . . when—" Mavis let the sentence go unfinished.

They knew what she meant.

Nobody else could have guessed it, not even the Denebs, but these two knew!

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They were silent for sometime, each busy with entirely personal thoughts that remained hidden behind mental shields. Charles was the first to cease ruminating and become vocal.

"Let's get down to business. David, what are your plans and where do we come in?"

"The plans are elementary enough: to find, identify and effectively deal with the opposition's key man on Venus. Take away the locking stone, and the arch falls down."

"Sometimes," qualified Charles.

"Yes, sometimes," Raven agreed. "If their organization is as good as it ought to be they'll have a deputy leader held ready to replace him when necessary. In that case, there will be another similar job on our hands."

"And after that there will be the Martians," Charles pointed out.

"Not necessarily. It depends on how they react to whatever happens here. I'm hoping they will pipe down if Venus drops out."

"One thing I don't get," said Charles thoughtfully. "What was to stop Terra's paying back the other planets in their own coin? Sabotage and all that stuff is a game at which two can play."

"Because, from the Terran viewpoint, that would mean fooling around with their own assets."

"Ah!" Charles gave his chins another massage. "They're decidedly handicapped there. It gives the rebels quite an advantage."

"Precisely."

"It's no business of ours," put in Mavis. "If it was, we would have been told as much." Her gaze was suddenly shrewd as it rested on Raven. "Have you been requested to interfere?"

"No, lady, and it's unlikely that I shall be asked."

"Why?"

"Because large as the issue may be in this minor corner of the galaxy, it's small and insignificant by comparison with bigger issues elsewhere." He added slowly, "Cogent information is all I ask. You need give no more help unless you wish."

"I do wish," Charles asserted. He glanced sidewise. "How about you, Mavis?"

"Count me out. I'm going to follow Leina's example and keep watch. After all, that's what we're here for, isn't it?"

Raven said, "You're dead right. Keeping watch is all-important. I am glad that fair maidens are available to tend to the job. It leaves us bull-headed males free to get on with our interfering."

SHE pulled a face at him but offered no comment.

"The setup here is amusing," Charles said. "We have an orthodox governor who utters strictly orthodox sentiments and is happily ignorant that the underground nationalist movement already is doing ninety per cent of the bossing. The big noise in this movement, the figure the rank and file look up to, is a large and handsome fellow named Wollencott."

"What's he got?"

"The face and figure for the part," Charles answered. "He is a native-born malleable with an imposing mane of black hair and an equally imposing voice."

"All that doesn't sound so formidable," Raven offered.

"Wait a bit, I've not finished. Wollencott is so well suited to portray the dynamic leader of a patriotic cause that he might have been especially chosen for the part—and he was!"

"By whom?"

"A hard character named Thorstern, the real boss, the power behind the throne, the lurker in the shadows."

"The puppet master, eh? Anything special about him?"

"Yes and no. The most surprising feature is that he is not mutant. He hasn't one paranormal aptitude." Charles paused, plucked thoughtfully at a fat lip. "But he is ruthless, ambitious, cunning, an excellent psychologist and

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has a high-powered, quick-moving brain good enough to serve a thousand monkeys. I classify him as an exceptionally high grade of pawn. Given really good wits, even a pawn can pull the strings of a dopy telepath."

"I know. I've listened in to one or two such cases. That's where the Denebs excel. They make full use of what they've got." Becoming slightly restless, Raven moved toward the door. "But we don't have to cope with the Denebs just yet, leastways, not *here*. The immediate objective is Thorstern."

"I'm coming with you." Heaving himself out of the pneumaseat, Charles hitched his middle, let guileless eyes rest on Mavis. "Hold the fort, honey. If anyone asks, tell them Papa's gone fishing—but don't say for what."

"See that you come back," she ordered. "In one piece and recognizable. That's all I ask."

THE RAZOR'S EDGE or Don't Drop That Blade!

IF YOU THINK man's oldest trouble is women you're wrong. His first and last headache is in getting a decent shave and the man doesn't draw breath who hasn't cursed his razor oft on a stilly morn. Well, cheer up, men, there's a new gimmick for you to try. A patent has been issued on razor blades of glass.

No fooling. The glass is ground to an approximate edge, then dipped in etching baths of hydrofluoric acid, which cuts the edge down to a keen, smooth, tooth-free line. The promise is made—and you've heard this before—that the glass blades give a superior shave and have excellent edge-holding qualities. Besides which they're cheap—if you don't drop them.

XIII

ALREADY the invariable eventide fog was creeping into the city, moving with sluggish persistent purpose along its streets and avenues in thin yellow sworls that thickened as the hidden sun went down. By midnight it would be a warm, damp, all-obscuring blanket.

Raven and his companion passed a shop window in which an outsize spectroscreen displayed ballet dancers moving delicately through a scene from *Les Sylphides*. Here the prima ballerina drifted across stage with infinite grace, pale and fragile, like a blown snowflake. A few miles away, within the encroaching dark, was monstrous vegetation that marked the frontiers of the half-known and the unknown. It was a contrast of extremes that few noticed and fewer thought about.

Stopping outside the window and observing the screen, Charles said, "See the ease and grace with which she pirouettes. She fascinates because she makes me wonder."

"About what?" Raven inquired.

"Whether her type are paranormals not recognized as such and not suspecting it themselves. Maybe they have some subconscious form of ESP that impels them to strain poetically toward a goal they can neither name nor describe."

"You may have something there."

"I'm sure I have, David." He turned and walked on, his gait like a penguin's waddle. "As a life form in their own right human beings have made a good accumulation of knowledge. How immensely greater might it be if they could add to it all the items they've already got but cannot use because they don't know they know them."

"Brother Carson, who is no stupe, is with you in that. He showed me a list of known mutants and warned me that it might be far from complete."

Charles nodded vigorously. "Rumor has it that an entirely new type was discovered recently. I was going to investigate when Leina called through and put me off."

"Indeed? What can this skewboy do?"

"I can't swear that the story has any basis in fact. The yarn goes that a young fellow of twenty-nine, living in a

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village two thousand miles away, had an unfortunate argument with a buzz saw."

"And so?"

"It whipped off his right hand quicker than Zip. That was some six or eight months ago. The stump healed over and he recovered from the shock. Next, the stump started to look queer. Got sort of raggedy. He went to a hospital. They kept him under observation a couple of months then decided the age of miracles is not past. He was growing another hand."

"A biomechanic," observed Raven. "Can service himself with new parts. Well, it's an innocuous faculty."

"Yes, sure, but the point is that up to then he didn't know he could do it because he had never lost anything before. I wonder how many more lack vital knowledge of themselves."

"Plenty. Look at what *we* know."

"I am looking," replied Charles quietly. "It is so much that it would shake a hundred worlds if they shared it. David, do you suppose that—"

RAVEN had stopped in midstride. "Finish it, Charles. Finish what you were going to say."

"Do you think that maybe even *we* don't know enough? That there are others who do know more, watching us precisely as we watch these, sometimes pitying us, sometimes laughing at us?"

"I can't say." He registered a wry grin. "But if there are, we do know one thing—they don't interfere with *us*."

"Don't they?"

"Not noticeably. Not in any manner we can recognize."

"We recognize Deneb tactics," Charles retorted. "They would do plenty of shoving around, if they could."

"Or even better, they could adopt our own methods to our very great confusion," Raven suggested, manifestly sceptical but willing to take it along. "They could appear to you and me pretty much as we appear to all these." He waved a hand to indicate the local citizenry. "Supposing I told you that I'm a Deneb myself—do you dare to call me a liar?"

"I do," said Charles with no hesitation. "You are a liar."

"I resent having to admit it." He gave the other a reassuring clap on the shoulder. "See, you *know* what I am. Therefore you have intuitive awareness. Definitely you're a paranormal and ought to take up ballet dancing."

"Hah!" Charles gloomed down at his ample front. "That's what I call throwing it back at me."

He fell silent as three uniformed men came around the next corner ahead and stopped in their path.

The trio were dressed as forest rangers, the only organized body, apart from special squads of police, officially permitted to bear arms on Venus.

One was murmuring, "Seems futile to me. They admit he jumped out and went down like a stone. Ten to one his busted body is lying across a limb a couple of hundred feet up and will stay there until it rots."

"Orders are orders," answered another. He was still beyond normal hearing but well within mental pickup. "He's got something special and nobody knows what it is. So we'd better keep our eyes skinned."

"For what? We don't know what he looks like. The description they gave could fit fifty people living in my section." A pause, then, "Heck, it could be made to measure for this guy coming along with the little fat dope."

"It could at that. Let's stop him and see what gives. Leave this to me." Assuming an attitude of studied disinterest, the first speaker waited until they drew level, wheeled swiftly on one heel and snapped with sudden authority, "Your name David Raven?"

Stopping and lifting a surprised eyebrow, Raven said, "However did you guess?"

"Don't be funny," advised the questioner, scowling.

Raven turned to Charles. His tones were pained. "He tells me not to be

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funny. Do you think I'm funny?"

"Yes," responded Charles. "You've been that way since you fell on your head at the age of three." His bland and stupid-seeming eyes shifted to the ranger. "Why do you want this person named—er—"

"There's money on his head. Don't you use your spectroscreen?"

"Sometimes," Charles admitted. "Other times it bores me and I let it stay dead."

The ranger commented to his companions, "Now you know why some folk stay poor." Ignoring Raven, he continued with Charles, who was looking suitably crushed.

"He's wanted sooner than immediately for imperilling the lives of crew and passengers of a space-ship, opening an airlock contrary to regulations, interfering with navigation, refusing to obey the lawful orders of a ship's officer, landing in a forbidden area, evading medical examination on arrival, evading customs search on arrival, refusing to pass through the antibacterial sterilization chambers and—" He drew a breath, asked one of the others, "Was there anything else?"

"Spitting in the main cabin," suggested another who had long yearned to do just that merely because a large lettered notice warned him he mustn't.

"I never spit," asserted Raven, giving him the cold eye.

"Shut up, you," ordered the first one, making it plain that he was taking no backchat from anyone. He switched to Charles, preferring that worthy's dumbness. "If you happen to come across this fellow, ring Westwood 1717 and tell us where he is. We'll see that you get your fair share of the take."

CHARLES was humbly grateful. He said to Raven, "Come on, we're late already."

They walked off, conscious that the three were watching them. The trio's undertone comments reached them in the form of clear mental impulses.

"Took us for rangers, anyway."

"Let's hope some ranger captain does too, if we happen to meet one."

"I still think Lancombe is way off the track. There's a *tambar* joint two blocks down, so what say—"

"Why don't they dig up his picture and distribute a few copies? There's more to this than has been advertised."

"Such as what?"

"Perhaps Wollencott wants him for personal reasons."

"Look, fellows, there's a *tambar* joint —"

"All right, we'll go there for half an hour." The mental stream started to fade very slowly. "If Wollencott wants him—"

They continued talking about Wollencott until they dimmed beyond hearing. Not one mentioned Thorstern or so much as gave that name a passing thought.

Which was quite a tribute to the brains of the owner of the name.

XIII

BLACK and ugly reared the great basalt castle that was the home of Thorstern. It dated back to the earliest days of settlement when smooth, high walls six feet thick were sure protection against antagonistic jungle beasts of considerable tonnage. Here the little group of first-comers had stubbornly clung until more shiploads built them up in numbers and strength of arms sufficiently to sally forth, take land and hold it.

But Thorstern had stepped in, strengthened its neglected walls, added battlemented towers and turrets. He spent lavishly as though his calculated obscurity in matters of power had to be counterbalanced by blatancy in some other direction. The result was a sinister sable architectural monstrosity that loomed in the thickening fog like the haunt of some feudal maniac who held a countryside in thrall.

Raven stood toying thoughtfully with the lobe of an ear while he studied it.

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"Quite a fortress," he remarked. "What does he call it—the Imperial Palace?"

"Originally it was known as Base Four," Charles told him. "Thorstern renamed it Blackstone. Locally it's referred to as 'the castle.' Well, what now? Do we go in after him or wait for him to come out?"

"We'll go in—in decent and civilized manner," Raven decided. "Through the front gate." After another look at their objective, he added, "You talk while I hold your arm and let my tongue hang out. Then we'll *both* look simple."

"Thanks," said Charles in no way offended. Strutting officiously up to the huge gate, he thumbed a bell push, waited with Raven by his side.

Four minds near by immediately radiated four different but equally potent oaths. They were pawn minds, all of them. There was not a mutant in the bunch.

It was to be expected. Thorstern, as an individual without talent other than that given by above average brains, would make full use of those blessed with paranormal dexterities but would not yearn for the pleasure of their company.

IN THESE respects the lord of the black castle ran as true to type as the lowliest of his servitors. It was a natural psychological reaction based on the concealed inferiority complex of Homo Today in the presence of what looked like Homo Tomorrow.

So it was a blue-jowled, commonplace pawn who opened a door in the thick wall, came out and peered through the heavy bars of the gate. He was squat, thick-shouldered, irritable, but sufficiently disciplined to conceal his ire.

"Wanting someone?"

"Thorstern," Charles answered.

"It's *Mister* Thorstern," reproved the other. "You got an appointment?"

"No."

"He won't see anyone without an appointment. He's a busy man."

"I am aware of the fact," Charles gave back. "Being so busy, he will wish to see us with the minimum of delay."

The guard frowned. His I.Q. was around 70, and he was steered mostly by his liver.

"Well?" insisted Charles, fatly bellicose. "You going to keep us here come Monday week?"

The other registered the baffled distaste of a slow mind that hates being pushed faster than it wants to—or can—move. Maybe he *had* better do something about this. The manifold ramifications of Thorstern brought all sorts of people to the gate at all times, though seldom as darkness fell.

Licking his lips, he asked in a hoarse voice, "What are your names?"

"They don't matter," said Charles.

"Well, what's your business?"

"That *does* matter."

"Heck, I can't tell them just that!"

"Try it and see," Charles advised.

Hesitating, the guard stared from one to the other, absorbed mental comfort from both without knowing it, went back into the wall. Those in the tiny room beyond greeted him with a chorus of remarks that caused not a whisper outside the door but did spike through the basalt in neural waves and came clearly to the pair waiting by the gate.

"Cripes. You're holding up the game."

"Who is it, Baxter? Someone important?"

"They won't say," was the guard's glum mutter. Picking the phone off the wall, he waited for its visiscreen to clear and show who was responding at the other end. He made his tones suitably apologetic. "Two fellers at the gate. Say they want to see Mister Thorstern."

"About what?"

"I don't know. All they'll tell me is that it matters."

"That's their opinion. The boss's may be different."

"Yes, sure." Baxter was in a quandry. "I thought I'd better check up with you. What'll I tell them?"

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"That they can state their business in specific terms or start fumbling their way back home."

"All right." Racking the phone, he threw the onlookers a pained glance, went into the rapidly gathering gloom. "See here, you two, the—"

He stopped, gaped outward beyond the gate. Visibility was now down to a mere four or five yards. Within that small radius there was nobody, nobody at all.

"Hey!" he called into the wall of fog. No reply. Again, much louder. "Hey!"

Nothing was to be heard but the dismal drip of water and the dim, subdued mixture of sounds from the city three miles away.

"Darn!" Giving it up, he returned to the door. A thought struck him just as he reached it, he came back and tried the gate. It was securely fastened. He glanced at its top. The quadruple row of spikes three inches from the overhead rock made it completely impassible. All the same, he had a moment of strange uneasiness. "Darn their hides!" he repeated, and went indoors.

Darkness became complete. The last dim fadings of light were swept away as if a gigantic shutter had been drawn across the concealed sky. Behind the gate there was a long narrow courtyard where visibility was down to mere arm's length.

THE two invaders halted in their progress through the courtyard. A large, bolt-studded door was set deeply in the wall immediately to their right. Though well hidden in the all-enveloping cloud, they *knew* the door was there and moved closer to inspect it.

Charles said, "They fitted that gate with a highly complicated lock containing fourteen tricky wards. Then they fitted the lock itself with an alarm guaranteed to scream bloody murder the moment anyone tried to tamper with it. Finally, they included a cutoff in the attendant's room so that the alarm would not operate while he was seeing to a caller." He gave a sniff of disdain. "That's what I call cleverness carried to the point of stupidity."

"Not necessarily," Raven differed. "Remember that they designed the layout solely for coping with their own kind, mutant or nonmutant. It's quite adequate for such a limited purpose. Dealing with Denebs—or the likes of you and me—is quite another problem."

"You're right, of course. That gate comes nearer to the unbustable, according to this world's rudimentary notions of unbustability. Do you see what I see?"

"Yes. There's a black-light beam across the passage just behind the door. Open the door and you break the beam."

"Everything to delay us," grumbled Charles, impatient of time-wasting futilities. "You'd think they had done it deliberately."

"Well, you trace the lines while I tend to the door. One man, one job."

He got on with his part straightaway. It involved no more than standing with hands in pockets and staring intently at the obstacle. Meanwhile, Raven gazed similarly at the thick rock to one side of the door.

Neither man said anything more. Each concentrating on his own special task, they stood side by side, unmoving, and stared to the front as if transfixed by a supernatural apparition invisible to others. After a while, Charles relaxed, took his attention from the door, but was careful not to disturb the other.

Half a minute later Raven likewise eased up and said, "It goes along a corridor, then down a passage to the right and into a small anteroom. The switch made a loud click when it snapped up, but fortunately the room was empty."

He braced a hand against the door, gave it a shove. It swung inward, heavily, without sound. The two stepped boldly through, closed the door behind them, walked along a narrow corridor illuminated by sunken ceiling lights. Their manner had the casual confidence

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of people who had purchased the castle last week and planned to furnish it tomorrow.

"All this gives some indication of the psychology of Thorstern," Raven commented. "The bolts and bars and telltale beams could easily be detected by any mutant endowed with first-class ESP, but he'd be unable to do anything about them. On the other hand, a teleport could manipulate the lot without any trouble—if only he could see them. So the place is wide open to a multitalented mutant such as a teleport with ESP. Thorstern proceeds on the assumption that there is no such creature. He'll hate to think he's wrong."

"He isn't wrong."

"Not yet. Not today. But someday he may be. That fellow Haller was classified as a pyrotic and no more, yet he realized too much the moment I touched him. He'd got a rudimentary form of ESP and didn't know it himself until then. He'd got one and one-tenth talents."

"A freak," defined Charles.

"Exactly! So Brother Thorstern is going to be anything but amiable when confronted by two freakier freaks such as ourselves."

"That's a handicap, considering that our purpose is to persuade him to see reason."

"Your finger is right on the sore spot. It's not going to be easy to knock sense into a powerful, ruthless individual motivated by fear. And it's so much harder when you don't want to show him why his suppositions are wrong and his fears groundless."

He let the subject drop as they reached the end of the corridor, turned into the right-hand passage and found three men walking toward them.

XIV

BEFORE any one of this trio had time to react to his suspicions, Raven said, brightly and with confidence that disarmed, "Pardon me, which is the way to Mr. Thorstern's room?"

He was answered by the middle one who bore himself with a vague air of authority. "First turn on the left, second door on the left."

"Thanks."

The three stood aside to let them pass, watched in silence as the invading pair strolled casually by them, but their minds shouted their inmost thoughts.

"Any caller for Thorstern is met at the gate and conducted to his room. How come these two are ambling around on their own? Never seen either of them before."

"Something funny here," pondered the second one. "Not usual for visitors to be left on the loose. I don't like it."

"Second door on the left, eh? Gargan thought fast when he gave them that one." The third was amused and unworried. "Trust Gargan always to play safe. That's why he's never got anywhere."

The first one, who was Gargan, resumed by deciding, "The moment they get around that next bend I'll give the boss a warning buzz."

Raven turned the corner, threw Charles a knowing glance, found the second door on the left, paused in front of it.

"I can pick up a hopeless tangle of thought streams and not one that says it's coming from Thorstern. That's natural, of course, since he won't spend all his time thinking solely of himself." He nodded at the door. "But there are no minds behind that. The room is empty. The walls are solid rock. The door can be sealed by remote control."

"The better mousetrap," defined Charles.

"A very empty mousetrap, however."

Shoving the door open, Raven walked inside, relaxed in a chair, eyed the blank screen.

Charles took a seat beside him, making the chair squeak with his bulk. He likewise kept his attention on the screen, but his mind, like Raven's, probed carefully in all directions.

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CLICK! went the door as relays operated and a dozen hidden bolts slid home. The screen glowed to life, swirled and colored. A swarthy face appeared.

"So Gargan was right. What are you two doing there?"

"Sitting and waiting," said Raven.

"I can see that. You've not much choice about it, have you?" The face in the screen registered a toothy and unpleasant smirk. "The guard at the gate swears that nobody has been admitted. Nevertheless, you two are inside. There's only one answer to that—you're a pair of hypnos. See if you can hypnotize a screen."

"You seem to think it's a crime to be a hypno," said Raven, carefully kicking the sore spot in a typical pawn mind.

"It's a crime for a hypno to use his power for illegal purposes," the other retorted. "And, in case you don't know, it's a crime to break into private premises."

Raven snapped, "In my considered opinion, it's also a crime for a thick-headed underling to amuse himself indulging adolescent triumph and let his own boss go hang." His features hardened. "We've come to talk to Thorstern. Better get him before someone paddles some sense into you."

"Why, you loud-mouthed marsh stink," began the other, becoming livid, "I could—"

"You could what, Vinson?" inquired a deep, resonant voice which came clearly from the cabinet's speaker. "It is a great mistake to lose one's temper. To whom are you speaking?"

Charles gave Raven a gentle nudge, "That sounds like the almighty Thorstern himself."

"Not so almighty as he thinks he is," Raven said.

The face in the screen had turned sidewise, become submissive, and was talking in apologetic tones. "It's a couple of skewboys, sir. They busted in somehow. We've got them pinned down in Room Ten."

"Indeed?" The voice was rich, calm, unhurried. "Have they offered any reason for such precipitate action?"

"They say they want to talk to you."

"H'm! I don't see why I should bother to gratify their desires. Do they think I am at everybody's beck and call?"

"Don't know, sir."

The invisible speaker changed his mind. "Oh, well, since they've got this far I might as well hear what they've got to say. There's a remote chance that I might learn something useful."

Servilely Vinson mouthed, "Yes, sir."

The face slipped off the screen, was replaced by another. Big, muscular, square-jowled, Thorstern was well past middle age, with a thick mop of white hair and deep bags under his eyes, but still handsome in a virile way. His character was engraved upon those broad features—intelligent, ambitious.

His sharp blue eyes looked over Charles first, taking in all details from feet to head, then moved to the other.

Without the slightest evidence of surprise or so much as a blink, he said, "Dear me, I know you! Only a couple of minutes ago I received your picture. The name is David Raven."

Raven gazed back at him level-eyed. "Now why could you possibly want a picture of *me*?"

"I did not want it," riposted Thorstern. "It was thrust upon me by our authorities who, on this planet at any rate, can lay fair claim to efficiency. Your photograph is being circulated. Apparently our police are most anxious to get hold of you." He *harumphed* to clear his throat, continued, "A person in my position would be greatly embarrassed were he found harboring wanted men. Therefore, if you have anything to say, you had better say it quickly—because you haven't got long."

"After which?"

THORSTERN'S broad shoulders rose in an expressive shrug. The gesture was made in the manner of a Roman emperor turning his thumbs down.

"The police will take you away, and

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my responsibility will cease."

"You're quite a character," Raven remarked, openly admiring him. "Too bad you insist on balling up the works. It makes our task so much the harder but no less necessary."

"What task?"

"To persuade you to call off the undeclared war you are waging against Terra."

"Heavens above!" Thorstern widened his eyes in sardonic amazement. "Do you expect me to believe that Terra would send a petty criminal to interview a mere business man about a purely fanciful war?"

"There is a war and you're running it."

"What proof have you?"

"No proof is required," said Raven.

"Why not?"

"Because you know it to be true even though you don't choose to admit it. Proof would be necessary only to convince a third party. There is no third party present. This is solely between yourself and us two."

"As one whose business and financial ramifications are widespread," said Thorstern, becoming ponderous, "inevitably I have been the target of all sorts of rumors and insults. The jealous and the spiteful are always with us. But I must admit that this bald and completely unsupported assertion of surreptitious warmonering is the most fantastic that has offended my ears to date."

"It is neither fantastic nor unsupported," Raven contradicted. "Unfortunately, it is a grim fact. It doesn't offend you, either. In fact, you take secret pride in it. You are tickled to bits because for once your well-publicized dummy, Wollencott, has failed to grab the limelight."

"Wollencott," echoed Thorstern quite unmoved. "I am beginning to see things a little more clearly. I presume that Wollencott—a melodramatic rabble rouser if ever there was one—has stamped on somebody's corns. So you've stupidly followed a false trail he has laid and it brought you straight to me."

Charles stirred in his seat and growled at the screen, "I am not in the habit of smelling along false trails."

"No?" Thorstern's gaze shifted, examined him a second time. Again he saw nothing but an obese individual with a plump face and decidedly dull-witted expression. "So you claim the honor of identifying me as the prime motive force behind an undeclared war?"

"If it can be called an honor."

"Then, sir, you are not only a crackpot but a dangerous one." He made a disparaging gesture. "I have no time for crackpots. It would be best to get you off my hands and let the police deal with you." His face was severe as he added coldly, "Like a good citizen, I have the utmost confidence in our police."

Charles retorted, "You are referring to those that happen to be in your pay. Everyone on this planet has good reason to fear them." His lazy gaze sharpened suddenly so that for the briefest moment he looked neither fat nor futile. "Except us!"

"You may yet find good reason to change that opinion," Thorstern assured. He transferred his attention back to Raven. "I deny all your accusations and that is that! If Terra thinks there is need to reassert her authority over Venus, let her do so in the proper quarter and in the proper way. Wollencott is the man you want without a doubt."

"We aren't interested in false fronts," Raven told him. "If we snatch Wollencott you will laugh most heartily, replace him with the next stooge on your private list. You won't lift a finger to save Wollencott because you'll assign to him the useful role of Venusian nationalism's first martyr. Terra has something better to do than provide a petty god with a few saints."

"The said deity being me?" inquired Thorstern.

"Of course. The sensible thing for us

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to do is get at the man who operates the puppets. That's why we've come direct to you. The alternative is to accept the fact that you are not amenable to reason and cope with you in some other and more effective manner."

"That is a veiled threat." Thorstern revealed strong white teeth. "It comes strangely from one so completely at my mercy."

"Enjoy yourself," advised Raven. "It's later than you think."

"I am now beginning to doubt your inherent criminality," Thorstern continued, ignoring the remark. "I think you are a case for a psychiatrist. You are motivated by a powerful obsession that I, Emmanuel Thorstern, a prosperous Venusian trader, am a kind of Goliath to whom you must play the part of David." He glanced down at a desk they could not see in the screen and finished with considerable acidity, "Yes, I see that your name actually is David. Possibly you are conditioned by it."

"Not so much as you are by Emmanuel," Raven suggested.

IT PRODUCED the first visible reaction on the other's strong features. Momentarily forsaking his determined composure, Thorstern scowled, then rasped, "I have broken men for less than that."

"And the last laugh has been theirs."

"Has it?" He lifted a heavy eyebrow. "Such people must have a most peculiar way of laughing."

"You didn't see enough. You see only what your eyes tell you they see, and that's your handicap. The point is that you may smash men but you'll never smash Terra. Call off this war while yet there is time."

"Or?"

"Or Terra will strike in her own way. Like to know how?"

"I'm listening."

"She will remove the opposition's key men one by one, starting with you!"

Thorstern wasn't fazed. Neither was he annoyed. Sweeping back his thick mop of white hair with a quick motion of his hand, he consulted some papers below the level of the screen and spoke judicially.

"My conscience being clear, I have no reason to be apprehensive of summary removal. Furthermore, we are all Terrans in law, subject to the Terran system of jurisdiction which regards a citizen as innocent until evidence of guilt is forthcoming. Such evidence will be impossible to produce, especially in the absence of certain witnesses, including yourselves."

"A counterthreat," Raven commented.

"Construe it as you please. You do not seem to appreciate your own position."

"We know it. We are trapped—you hope."

"You are in a room with solid walls and devoid of windows. The only door is multiple locked by remote control and cannot be unlocked, except remotely. It is a room reserved for interviews with paranormals of unknown power and unknown purposes."

"Rather elaborate precautions for the home of an honest trader, aren't they?" Raven asked.

"I have elaborate interests to protect. The means I have detailed are not all by a long chalk. You have reached only the second line of defense. Even in this room from which I am speaking you would find me invulnerable!"

Smiling to himself, Raven said, "It would be nice to put that to the test."

"You will not be given the chance. Get it into your slow-thinking minds that ordinary men are not without ability. Some of us—myself especially—know how to deal with paranormals. You cannot read my mind, can you? You don't know where I am, in which direction, or how far away. I may be within ten yards of you, my thought stream grounded by an intervening wall of silver mesh, or I may be the other side of the planet."

"Sounds like you're scared of someone."

"I fear nobody," rasped Thorstern, and was speaking truth. "But I do rec-

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ognize the existence of powers denied to me and therefore use prudence. On Venus or Mars one can do little else. Our proportion of paranormals is high, a factor Terra should take into account before starting something she might not be able to stop."

"Terra has mutants of her own," Raven told him. "Far more than you suppose. Who carted the lot of you to new planets in the first place? The Terran space-fleet which was and still is manned by men who've spent anything from fifteen to twenty years zooming through the deep dark and absorbing hard radiations. Many children of space-dogs aren't like other people's children."

"I'll take you up on that." Thorstern felt the gratification of one about to make an unanswerable point. "If, as you pretend, there is a war being waged, why doesn't Terra retaliate in kind with her own mutants?"

"Who said Venus was using mutants for her attacks?" Raven asked sharply.

Thorstern spent one-tenth of a second chiding himself for the obvious blunder, then covered up by asking in mock surprise, "Isn't that what is happening?"

"No."

"What then?"

"Something a good deal worse. The nationalist underground movement is using a new kind of undetectable ray to sterilize our womenfolk."

"That's a lie!" His voice was loud and ireful, his face slightly flushed.

"Of course it is," admitted Raven, without shame. "And you *know* it. You've just said so. *How* do you know?"

"No man could play so lousy a trick." Secretly irked by his second successive mistake, Thorstern decided he would fake no more. "I am going to deal with you as I would with any other menacing crazies who break into my home."

"If you can."

"It will be absurdly easy. Every skew-boy has exactly the same kind of lungs as everyone else. He goes to sleep as swiftly and deeply, even though he may be a nocturnal. He is as helpless in his slumbers as any new-born babe."

"Meaning you intend to gas us into insensibility?"

"Precisely," agreed Thorstern.

"And you refuse to do anything about stopping this war?"

"Don't be silly. I cannot admit that there is a war, much less that I have any part of it. I am treating you as unsavory characters badly wanted by the police and I'm going to ensure that they take you away peacefully. That is my duty as a law-abiding citizen."

He leaned forward as if reaching for something near the edge of the screen.

XV

ALREADY slumped low in his chair, Charles suddenly slid down further, quietly, undramatically. His plump face was pale, his eyes closed.

Raven stood up, removing his attention from the man in the screen. Bending over Charles, he tugged him back into sitting position, slid a hand under the packet and gently rubbed him over the heart.

"Quite a diverting little byplay," remarked Thorstern, still bent forward, but with his hand momentarily arrested. "The fat boy plays sick. You massage his chest, looking serious and worried. In a few moments you'll tell me he will die unless something is done mighty quick. I am then supposed to go into a panic, withhold the gas, withdraw the bolts and send somebody running to you with a *tambar* bottle."

His back still turned to the screen, Raven said nothing. He remained over Charles, holding him in the chair, rubbing near to the heart.

"Well, it won't work." Thorstern practically spat out the words. "It is too infantile a trick to deceive a halfwit. Besides, if that fat boy's stroke did happen to be genuine I would be quite content to sit here and watch him die."

"I am glad you said that." Raven did not bother to look around. "People like us frequently are handicapped by ethical

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considerations. It is characteristic weakness. We are weak here men like you are strong."

"Thank you," said Thorstern with sarcasm. "Flattery will not avail you either."

"So it is quite a relief when prospective victims sweep all our qualms away," added Raven. He swung round, looked straight into the screen, his eyes silver-flecked and luminous. "Goodby, Emmanuel! Some day we may meet again!"

The other did not reply. He was incapable of it. His formerly powerful features were now undergoing a series of violent contortions. Still gently chafing the flaccid body in the chair, Raven watched without surprise. Thorstern's tormented features dropped below the level of the screen. A hand appeared, grasping spasmodically. The face came back, contorted in manner harrowing to see. All this had taken no more than thirty seconds.

Then the phenomenon departed as swiftly as it had arrived. The facial muscles relaxed, composed themselves, the countenance tidied itself, though still shining with perspiration. The deep voice spoke again, cool, calm, collected. It appeared to be addressing a hidden microphone somewhere to the left.

"Baxter, my two visitors are about to leave. See that they are not obstructed."

HE REACHED forward, touched a stud and the door bolts slid back. It was his last deed in this existence, for the whole face changed again, the mouth fell open, the head vanished from the screen as the body gave way beneath it.

Charles stirred as Raven shook him with great vigor. Opening his eyes, he shivered, got to his feet, teetered a little and breathed heavily.

"We must move fast, David. I thought I had him, but the cunning devil—"

"I know. Come on!"

He jumped to the door, jerked it open, hustled Charles through. Hurriedly they passed through the area of the still inoperative beam, out through the door and into the thick fog of the courtyard. The welter of surrounding thoughts lent urgency to their feet.

" . . . so this coutch dancer comes on like an educated snake . . . *He's dead I tell you.* . . . take more than a Hotsy to set fire to that dump . . . *was reaching for the gas-stud when they got him somehow, heaven knows how.* . . . story goes that someone was on Jupiter a couple of years back but I reckon it's another Terran rumor because . . . *hardly at the gate yet. Get the siren going . . . shoot on sight . . .* "

Baxter, surely as ever, was waiting at the gate. Bad visibility prevented his recognizing them until they were close, and then his eyes popped wide.

"You? How'd you get in?"

"Is it any business of yours?" Raven gestured at the steel barrier. "Obey orders and open up. Hurry! We're pressed for time."

"Are you now?" Baxter paused, one hand on the lock, and glowered at them. "Who's doing this job, you or me?"

"Me!" said Raven. He punched Baxter on the nose, licked his knuckles. "Sorry, chum."

There had been plenty of vim and weight behind the blow. The guard went down and lay there making bubbling noises. Turning the lock, Raven flung the gate open. "You've done enough," he told Charles. "Time you went home."

"Not likely!" Charles gave him a knowing look. "The gaping gate is a gag, otherwise you wouldn't have smacked down that noisy sleeper. So you're going back inside." He began to retrace his steps into the courtyard, doing it at a fast waddle. "And so am I."

Then the alarm sounded. It was an electric siren located high above the battlements. Beginning with a low and eerie moan, it speeded up to an ear-splitting screech that ripped through the fog, echoed and re-echoed across the surrounding countryside.

The two hastened through the enveloping cloud that pressed damply on their faces, created pearls of moisture

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in their hair and trailed streakily behind them in thin wisps that resembled fine wool. At the farther end of the courtyard, well beyond the door they had previously entered, was a narrow stone archway with a lantern dangling from its center, a lantern obviously intended more for ornament than utility. That was the impression it gave and was intended to give. It hung in ornate innocence and cast a thin fan of black light on a row of pinhead-sized cells set in the step beneath the arch.

The siren was still wailing as Raven sought to trace the leads from this deceitful setup. Finally, he stepped through the arch, Charles following. A moment later the siren ceased its clamor, dying out with a horrid moan. The ensuing hush was disrupted by angry voices coupled with a host of equally wrathful thought forms.

"Would have taken longer than I'd liked to bust that beam," Raven remarked. "The lines run all over the shop and back through a large switchboard. However, I was lucky."

"In what way?"

"Breaking the beam vibrates a visible telltale, and nobody was watching it at the moment. There seems to be quite a panic inside."

He stood close to the wall, peered around the corner and through the arch toward the gate. A scuffling of many feet could be heard in the gloom, a jabber of voices, each trying to overshout the others. It was easier to listen to their minds.

"Too late. Gate's open. Here he is, flat out. Well, you three were in the room. What were you doing when he got conked? Playing jimbo? Hear that? Any skewboy can bust in or out while these lazy bums play jimbo. Let's after 'em. How're we going to do that? Feeling our way like blind men? Think we've got radar vision? Not on your life. I tell you they're skewboys and multitalented at that!"

"They won't be so hot," someone said, "when we catch 'em."

CHARLES whispered, "If I were like them, I'd hate the guts of people like us."

"They do, and I don't blame them." Raven gestured for silence. "Listen!"

"Aw, have it your own way. I'm going after them. They can't get away without making noises, and I'm going to shoot at noises and ask questions afterward. Coming along, Sweeny? What I call a *really* talented feller is one who can digest a lump of lead."

The thoughts of these pursuers faded as their minds turned to the task of listening to fugitive feet. Those remaining by the gate were still trying to revive the stricken Baxter. Another jumble of neural waves was radiating from inside the castle.

"Nothing to show what killed him. Seems like his heart just stopped. I tell you it was sheer coincidence. No hypno can operate through a scanner, much less cause his subject to die. Then why'd he draw the bolts and order the gate open? He was hypnoed good and proper, I tell you, and through a scanner at that! Those two guys have got something nobody human ought to have!"

"You did well there," Charles murmured with approval. "When you scowled into the screen at precisely the right moment it put them clean off the track. They're putting all the blame on you."

"I'd hate them to get on the right track."

"Yes, so would I." The plump face puckered as Charles went on, "If only there were some way of telling them things without giving it to the Denebs for free."

"There isn't. There's no way, no way at all."

"I know." He went quiet, again listened to the other minds.

"You called Plain City yet? Yes, they've a bunch on the way. The boss will have fourteen fits when he gets back and hears all about this."

"There you are." Raven nudged the other. "What we wanted to know. Thor-

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stern's not here but is expected. That fellow in the room looked nothing like Thorstern by the time you were using him. A malleable, eh?"

"I knew it the moment I made contact," said Charles, becoming disgruntled again. "It came like a shock, but it was nothing to the shock I gave him."

"He'll have got over it now. Death is quite a considerable relief to the feelings." He gave a quiet laugh. "Isn't it?"

Ignoring the question, Charles continued, "He was a guy named Greatorex and one of the only three mutants permitted in the place. They've been trained to impersonate Thorstern to such perfection that it becomes second nature. That's why he talked about being invulnerable in the room. The big boss himself was invulnerable simply because he wasn't there."

"Where are the other pair? Did his mind tell you?"

"Somewhere in the city, taking it easy until they're wanted."

"Humph! You can see what that means. If Thorstern is due back and doesn't know what's happened, he'll probably come in person. But if somebody has made contact and given him all the details, he may play safe by handing us another malleable. Listen to this fellow . . . he's getting ideas."

It was coming through the wall. "All right, the gate was open and one of those dopy guards put down. Does that mean they've taken it on the run? Maybe they're still hanging around. I say we ought to search this dump and the sooner the better."

A thinner, more impatient mind answered, "You're crammed to the ears with ifs, buts and supposings. I can do plenty of that myself when I've nothing better to do. For instance, suppose they happen to be supermalleables, what then? You've not only got to find out *where* they are but also *who* they are. Heck, one of them might have bloodied his own beak, laid flat and had a hard time keeping his face fixed while kidding the lot of us that he is Baxter." A brief pause, then, "Come to that, how do you know that I am *me?*"

Raven grumbled, "Some folks lack the ability to leave well enough alone."

"That comes well from you," observed Charles, indulging in a fat smile.

"I asked for it." Raven stared again into the courtyard, surveyed surrounding walls. "The hunt is on. We've no choice but to try to dodge them until either Thorstern or his image arrives."

XVI

DODGING wasn't so difficult. Raven and Charles sat in the thick, all-concealing mist atop a blank, battlemented wall some forty feet high. A tree-cat might have scented them up there. A chirruping supersonic could have got a stream of echoes from them. Even a floater could have found them by obeying his natural instinct to snoop where pawns could not.

But the hunters were men in the ordinary, everyday sense of the term. They had their limitations as has every other life form great or small, for the great are within other, different and often inconceivable limits, just as binding, just as restricting, although in a wider sense.

To these pawn minds a mutant was a kind of vaudeville character who had gone too far, developed delusions of grandeur and might at any time unite with ruthless prototypes to make slaves of normal men. A multitalented mutant was infinitely worse, a nonhuman creature disguised in human shape and theoretically capable of anything, anything at all.

The notion of being suddenly confronted by a biological monstrosity which was hypno-telepath-pyrotic-whatever all rolled into one, with no handicaps other than the sole inability to outjump a bullet, was too much for two of the searchers.

One went through the archway, pointing a peculiar hand lamp on the studs to keep them activated. He sought futilely

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around the area, his eyes wide, his back hairs erect, and passed a couple of times right under the feet of the quarry before he gave up and went out.

Another emerged from the courtyard door, caught the vague sound of movement, looked toward the arch. The two approached carefully, hesitantly, until each saw a form looming in the fog.

Both barked, "Who's that?" and triggered simultaneously.

One missed. The other got a slug in his left arm. The sound of shots stirred the edgy castle still further. Somebody in the distance far beyond the gate fired vertically and plugged a darker patch of fog that was anything but man-shaped. The ether became full of abuse.

"According to what I hear, there has been a large number of questionable marriages in the past." Raven leaned forward, stared past his dangling feet.

"I hear something else." Charles glanced upward. "Do you?"

"Yes. Someone's coming. I've got a feeling that it's the man we want."

The sound was a superswift *whup-whup-whup* as of giant vanes whirling at considerable altitude. The copter was coming from the east, flying high above the night fog.

A THIN orange-colored ray shot from a corner turret of the castle, spiked upward through the cloud and gleamed steadily. The noise of vanes grew louder as the oncoming machine lowered toward the beacon. A minute later it was directly overhead.

Guided either by its own instruments or radioed instructions from the ground, the copter lowered into the mist, boldly descended through it, landed on the graveled area outside the gate. The orange beam cut off. Several pairs of feet ran through the courtyard and out the gate toward the new arrival.

"Now to join the deputation." Edging off the stonework, Raven dropped the forty feet to ground. He did not drift down like a floater. He fell in the same manner with which he had plunged into the forest, a swift and normal fall checked by last-minute deceleration. Charles followed in exactly the same uncanny way.

There was a minor uproar of voices and accompanying thought forms coming from the direction of the shrouded copter. A dozen men all trying to talk at once. Two of the gate guards were lounging outside their post and looking toward the tumult with such intentness that neither took much notice of the vaguely outlined pair who hastened through the gate.

The escaping pair went only a little way toward the machine, just far enough for the fog to hide them from the watchers by the gate. At that point they took a half circle that brought them near the copter on the side farthest from the castle.

A man, grim-faced and gimlet-eyed, was standing at the top of the copter's landing ladder. He looked like the twin brother of the unfortunate Greatorex.

The minds of those talking to him revealed a most curious situation. Not one knew with any degree of certainty whether Thorstern himself had died and they were now reporting the fact to a dummy, or whether a substitute had suffered and they were telling Thorstern himself or another substitute.

With masterful cunning the would-be dictator of a world had been frank with them, let them in on his scheme of quadrupling himself, then drilled them to accept any obvious Thorstern as the real Thorstern.

The trick was useful in the extreme. No mind probe could detect a substitution in the brain of anyone serving the poseur. Neither could any of the leader's rank and file be tempted to take a crack at him in person, knowing that the odds were three to one against nailing the right man and that vengeance was sure to follow.

But for once the man atop the ladder was caught napping. No silver mesh screen insured the privacy of his mind. He was in the open and prima-

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rily concerned with getting a fair idea of what had happened within his hide-out.

His mind admitted that he was indeed Thorstern and no other, a fact that would have lent comfort to the gripers now before him had there been a 1M among them. Already he was concerned with the notion of returning to Plain City to speed up the hunt and of sending another impersonator back to the castle to take the full brunt of any second blow that might be made.

"Then this guy glared straight at him as if to say, 'I hope you drop dead,'" continued the frontmost talker. "Upon which he did just that! When a couple of things that aren't human can waltz straight in and—"

"Through the gate, through the alarm system and everything else," contributed a second. "Then top it by walking out of a locked room."

A third voiced exactly what was in the listening man's mind. "What gives me the willies is the fact that if they can do it once, they can do it again—and maybe more besides."

Thorstern backed half a step. "You've searched the place? Thoroughly?"

"Every inch, boss. Couldn't find hair nor hide of them. We called for some help from town. They're sending some pussies and a gang of skewboys. Fight fire with fire."

As if in confirmation there came from far away the faint, irritable yowling of haltered tree-cats.

"They'll do a fat lot of good," opined the first, too pessimistic to care who knew it. "Not unless they happen to meet Raven and the fat chump on the way. They've had a long start by now."

Thorstern felt he had heard enough and came to a decision. "In view of all this I'd better go back to town. I'll return immediately I'm satisfied everything's being done that can be done. Expect me back in a couple of hours' time or three at most."

He said it straight-faced, knowing that he had not the slightest intention of returning so long as it might be at his personal peril. Another would double for him on his next appearance.

"If any more come asking for me, tell them I'm away, you don't know where. If a caller proves to be this Raven again, or looks a little bit like him, talks or acts like him, or gives you reason to think he's animated by similar ideas, don't argue or give him a chance. Use your guns on him and use them effectively. I will accept full responsibility should anyone make a mistake."

With that, he stepped into the copter with an air of self-confident deliberation which concealed his inward desire to get away fast. He was shaken, though he took every care not to show it.

HE GROWLED at the pilot, "Get going," and lay back in his seat. His mood was one of worried introspection.

The vanes whirled, the machine bounced a little, rocked slightly and went up. Raven and his companion went up with it by the simple method of stepping close and hooking a leg over the wheel braces. Formerly hidden from view of the talkers by the copter's intervening bulk, they became momentarily visible as they soared. A group of startled faces got a good look at them for two or three seconds before they disappeared into the ground-hugging cloud. Reaction was angry and confused.

"Quick, gimme that gun. Quick, I say! You got ten thumbs?"

"Easy, Meaghan, you might hit the boss."

"Or the pilot. D'you want a ton of metal dropped on your crust?"

"Got to do something. Darn these skewboys!"

"Phone the city again. They'll shoot 'em off the undercarriage as it descends."

"This is where a couple of well-

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armed floaters might do some good. Why not—"

"Stick around, Dillworth, in case the pilot smells a rat and comes down." The speaker perked his ears, caught the still rising *whup-whup-whup*. "No, he's carrying on. Stick around all the same."

"Where are you going?"

"Inside. I'll contact the boss on the radio and tell him what's underneath."

"Good idea. A shower of slugs will blow them off their perch."

The copter came out of the cloud into bright starlight and the shine from a mock moon called Terra. They had emerged from the haze at nine hundred feet. Daytimes it rose to a minimum of forty thousand, leaving the ground dull but clear.

Heading directly for the Plain City beacon, the pilot was content to skim over the fog. There was no point in gaining more altitude during so short a run. Subconsciously he sensed that the machine was less lively than it had been an hour ago. But he wasn't worried about it. At night the atmosphere's oxygen content varied from hour to hour and tended to make his motors seem temperamental.

He was already over the city when the radio beeped, and he put out a hand to switch on his mike. At the same time the door opened and Raven stepped inside.

"Good evening," he said to Thorstern, very pleasantly.

With his hand still hovering over the switch, the pilot threw a hurried glance through the windshield to confirm that he really was airborne, then growled, "How the blue blazes—"

"Stowaway reporting, sir." Raven grinned at him. "And there's another one outside riding the rods. A much bulkier one." He turned his attention to Thorstern, followed that person's intent gaze to a side pocket. "I shouldn't if I were you," he advised.

Deciding that it's for bosses to do the bossing, the pilot flipped his switch and snapped, "Well?"

A voice drummed from the tiny speaker. "Tell Mr. Thorstern to grab a gun and put a dozen slugs through the floor. Those two guys are squatting on the undercarriage."

"He knows," said the pilot.

"Good grief!" The voice said in an aside to someone else, "The boss already knows." Then it asked the pilot, "What's he done about it?"

The pilot turned inquiringly to Thorstern who sat cold-eyed, stony-faced, uttering not a word.

"Nothing," the pilot reported.

"You don't mean—" The other's rising tones suddenly cut off, and there came a sharp click as the distant transmitter closed down.

"He's jumping to conclusions," observed Raven. "He thinks you're both out of the fight and that he's been talking to me."

"And who may you be?" asked the pilot, his tone suggesting that only hobos came aboard in mid-air.

Thorstern spoke for the first time. "Keep out of this, Jessop. There's nothing you can do."

His bothered brain provided an interesting example of how inconsequential thoughts sometimes come uppermost in times of crisis. He was in a jam and, judging by what had occurred at the castle, it was a very tight one.

BUT all he thought of at that moment was, "An antigrav cab has a load limit of five hundred pounds. A copter can haul more than a ton. If I'd used an antigrav I wouldn't be in this fix. After this, no more copters for me. Not unless I've got an escort."

"You've got an escort—my friend and myself," Raven pointed out. He shoved the door open. "Come on. We're stepping out."

Thorstern stood up slowly. "I'd break my neck."

"You'll be all right. We'll have hold of you."

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"What's to stop your letting go?"

"Not a thing."

Thorstern's mental reaction was, "He can hypnotize me into doing anything he wishes, anything at all, even to dying, by remote influence, through a scanner. It would be better to do things of my own free will. I can bide my time. Other circumstances provide other opportunities."

"That's being sensible," Raven approved. "Stay with us until we blunder. Then you can tear our hearts out."

"I know you're a 1M and can treat my mind like an open book." Thorstern moved toward the door. "And more besides. There's nothing I can do about it —yet!"

He braced himself as Raven backed out ahead of him, grasped an arm, and Charles reached up to take the other. Thorstern had brains and a good deal of animal courage, but his whole nature rebelled against a leap into space. With a parachute or antigrav belt he would not have hesitated for a moment. With no more than other hands grasping him it wasn't so good.

So he closed his eyes and held his breath as they left the copter and plummeted down. He was conjuring visions of a rocky wall or tilted roof rocketing from the whiteness to smash his legs and break his body when a powerful pull on both arms slowed him down. A gable end rose from the mist, brushed his feet, then he landed in a street.

Far overhead the pilot was gabbling into his transmitter. "Couple of fellers took him out. I took it for granted they were floaters but they went down like stones. There was something mighty queer about the whole business. He went without wanting to, but he went."

Raven said, "Your friend Jessop is on the police band and screaming for help."

"I don't think it will be of much use." Thorstern looked around, trying to identify his surroundings in the dim light. "But no matter."

"Becoming fatalistic?"

"I accept circumstances that are temporarily beyond my power to change. I have learned to wait. No game goes wholly in one's favor all the time. It is the last and final move that counts."

The statement was devoid of misplaced confidence or braggadocio. It was the voice of experience, the considered opinion of one whose complicated plans frequently had suffered obstructions, delays, setbacks, all of which had been overcome next week, next month or the following year. He was admitting that this unlucky night he was beaten and if he died would be finished for keeps, but he was also warning them that while he lived there was always tomorrow.

XVII

MAVIS opened the door and let them in without being summoned by a knock or ring. Expressing neither pleasure nor surprise, she had the matter-of-fact air of one who has kept completely in touch with events and knew exactly what was happening from moment to moment.

In the manner of a mother mildly reproving a small and wayward child, she said to Charles, "You are going to regret this. I feel it coming." Then she went into the kitchen.

"Now we've got still another type of mutant," grumbled Charles. He flopped into a chair, making its seat bulge down between the legs. "A prognosticator."

Thorstern stared after her in open approval and remarked, "It's a pleasure to hear someone talking sense."

"Everyone talks sense according to his or her particular lights. Each man is his own oracle." Raven shoved a pneumaseat toward him. "Sit down. You don't have to play statues just because you're in bad company."

The other sat. Already he was striving to drive away a series of thoughts

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that insisted on coming back. He was anxious not to nurse them because they could be seen whenever these two saw fit to peer inside his skull and, for all he knew, they were peering without cease. So he tried to swat the thoughts as one would swat half a dozen annoying flies, but they hung around and kept buzzing.

"This pair of multis can protect their thoughts. Probably the woman can also. But I can't hide my own and doubt whether they can shield them for me. The patrols already will be scouring the streets, some concentrating on this neighborhood. They'll include whatever telepaths can be dug up at this late hour. So unless this room has built-in screens to give it privacy, there's a fair chance that some passing mind probe will recognize my thought stream and identify its source."

GIVING Raven a surly eye, he said, "I've jumped out in midair. I've sat down when told. I've obeyed orders. What next?"

"A talk."

"It's two in the morning. You could have talked tomorrow by appointment and at a reasonable hour." He pursed his lips. "Was there any need for all this preliminary melodrama?"

"Unfortunately, yes. You've made it hard to gain contact. You and the organization over which you preside."

"Meaning my extensive trading interests? Nonsense! Seems to me you're animated by a persecution complex."

"We've been through all this before. Didn't you get a record of our conversation with your very accomplished impersonator?"

Much as he would have liked to deny all knowledge of any troubles, Thorstern was too wise to let himself utter something that was simultaneously contradicted by his mind.

So he said, truthfully, "I've not yet had the details of what you said to Greatorex. All I do know is that he's dead and you had a hand in it. I don't like it. Eventually you won't like it either!"

Charles emitted a loud sigh and interjected, "That's a nice, vivid, satisfying picture of people hanging by their necks. Your imagination operates in full colors. A few of the details are inaccurate, though. The knots are in the wrong place. And I don't possess two left feet."

"Do I have to endure criticism in addition to mental prying?" Thorstern asked Raven.

"He couldn't resist it. Sadistic pleasures ask for adverse comment." Raven paced to and fro, the prisoner's gaze following. "Under the delusion that Greatorex was really you, we asked him to stop cutting off Terra's toes. We gave him fair warning that toe-cutting is something the victim has every right to resent. He insisted on playing the tune as before. Superb as his act proved to be, he was hamstrung."

"Why?" asked Thorstern, watching.

"It was not within his power to make a major decision on your behalf. Knowing you, he didn't dare. By virtue of his peculiar position he was without the initiative that could have saved him." He made a that-is-that gesture. "And so he's dead."

"For which you're now sorry?"

"Sorry?" Raven turned toward him, eyes bright with silver motes in their iris. "Certainly not! We couldn't care less!"

It sent a most unpleasant feeling down Thorstern's back. When there was a highly desirable end in view he could be decidedly cold-blooded himself but never did he display it with such open callousness.

"Seems there are others who enjoy sadistic pleasures," he stabbed, quite reasonably.

"You misunderstand. We are not happy about the matter but neither do we grieve. You can call it splendid indifference."

"Practically the same thing." This was an opportune moment to catch the

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ears of a patrol if one were near. "I don't know how you did it but I call it murder!"

Mavis came in with the percolator and cups. She poured three, set out a plate of biscuits.

"Our visitor is talking about murder," Charles told her. His chuckle was fat and hearty. "Know what it means?"

Giving him a look of mock menace, she retorted, "Some day I hope to," and retired again to the kitchen.

"Murder isn't funny," stated Thorstern.

"Not to those left weeping," Raven agreed. "The victim himself never seems to mind." Again the strangely penetrating examination. "Ever noticed how little resentment is shown by the dead?"

"I've noticed they're sometimes avenged by the living."

"It is imaginary vengeance. Some cannot smell blood without thirsting for more."

That was an obtuse crack at himself, Thorstern felt. An undeserved one. Whatever else he might be, he was not a bloodthirsty monster. True, he was running what whining Terrans saw fit to call a war but which was in reality a liberation movement. A few killings had been inevitable. He had approved only those absolutely necessary to forward his designs. And those he had duitfully deplored. He was by far the most humane conqueror in history.

"Would you care to explain that remark? If you are accusing me of wholesale slaughter I'd like you to state one instance, one specific case."

"There are only individual cases in the past. The major atrocities are located in the future, if you consider them absolutely essential, and if you live that long!"

"Another prognosticator," commented Charles, this time completely without humor. Indeed, he made it ck of grim foreboding.

oring him, Raven continued, you know how true that is, how far you are prepared to go, how great a cost you are willing to pay—and exact—to boss a world of your own. It is written in the depths of your mind. It stands out in letters of fire: *no price is too high!*"

THERE was no immediate response. Thorstern could find nothing to say. He knew what he wanted. He wanted it cheaply and with as little trouble as possible. But if tough opposition jacked the price sky-high in terms of cash or lives, it would still be paid, with regrets, but paid.

At the present moment he was in the hands of this bellyaching pair. They could write "Paid" to his stubborn ambitions once and for all and in the only way it could be done, by making him share the fate of Greatorex.

So far they'd been queerly hesitant about taking this drastic short cut, preferring to argue with him first. For the life of him—or the death of him—he could not decide whether their callousness was advertised to conceal an underlying squeamishness or whether it was backed up by the same glowing-eyed cruelty with which a cat tediously torments a mouse it is going to eat anyway.

His attention wandered toward the door, stealthily, in the hope that none would notice. But he could not suppress concomitant thoughts. If a patrol overheard that talk of murder, they would not necessarily bust in at once. They might first go for more help of a formidable kind.

Raven was still talking, although the other was only half-listening. "If your nationalist movement really was no more than a means of gaining self-government for Venusians, we could find it in us to sympathize despite the violence of its methods. But it isn't that. It is designed to gain you the power you love. Poor little crawling, creeping grub!"

"Eh?" Thorstern's attention snapped back.

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"I said you're a poor little crawling, creeping grub, hiding from the light, squirming around in the dark and pathetically afraid of a thousand things, including anonymity. So you yearn for petty predominance over a colony of similar grubs during a mere heart beat in the span of time. And then you are gone. Dust into dust. An empty name in a useless book, mouthed by myopic historians and cursed by weary school children. I suppose you call that immortality?"

It was too much. Thorstern had a thick hide, but it was thin in one spot. He could not stand being regarded as a no-account, a piker, a comparative seeker of butts on the sidewalk. He could not endure being small.

His broad face livid, he shot to his feet, thrust a hand in a pocket, took out three photographs and flung them on the table. For the first time his voice was vibrant with emotion.

"You've some good cards and they tickle you pink. But I've seen them. Here are a few of mine. Not all! You'll never see the rest!"

XVIII

RAVEN picked up the top photograph and studied it. It was a blown-up snapshot of himself, rather old and not very good, but good enough.

"It's on the spectroscreen every hour," stated Thorstern with savage satisfaction. "Reproductions are being issued to patrols as fast as they can be turned out. The tougher you get with me the tougher you'll make it for yourself. You pranced into this world despite plans to grab you on arrival. See if you can get out of it the same way. It won't prove so easy." He switched to Charles. "And the same applies to you, Gutsy."

"It doesn't. I don't intend to run away." Charles settled himself lower in the chair. "I'm quite comfortable here. Venus suits me as much—or as little—as any other ball of dirt. Besides, my work is here."

"What work?"

"That," said Charles, "is something you wouldn't understand."

"He walks dogs and is ashamed to admit it," Raven said. Tossing the picture onto the table, he picked up the second, glanced at it. His features went taut. Flourishing it in front of the other, he demanded, "What did you do to him?"

"Me? Nothing!"

"You did it by proxy. Others did the dirty work for you, by order."

"I gave no specific instructions," Thorstern contradicted. "I told them only to pick up Steen and make him tell what had occurred. So they did."

"And enjoyed the doing by the looks of it." Raven was annoyed and showed it. "Now Steen is dead through no fault of his own. I don't mind that any more than he minds it."

"Don't you?"

"No. His end doesn't matter a hoot. It would have come eventually though he lived to be a hundred." With a jerk of disgust he flipped the photograph aside. "What I do dislike is the obvious fact that he died slowly. That's unforgivable." His eyes glowed with sudden fires. "It will be remembered!"

Again Thorstern felt a cold shiver. He was not afraid—it wasn't within him to admit to fear—but to himself he conceded a certain degree of apprehension. He had played a card, hoping it would serve as a dire warning. Perhaps it had been a mistake.

"They exceeded my orders." He was making a feeble attempt to pass the buck. "I administered a most serious reproof."

"He reproved them," Raven told Charles. "How nice!"

"They pleaded that he was stubborn and made them go farther than they realized." Thorstern decided it might pay to enlarge on this subject while was hot. No rescue party had resp to his talk about murder. Maybe one would pick up his dissertat

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Steen. Any form of hollering would serve so long as it brought results.

HE WENT on, "They used a telepath, from a safe distance so' Steen couldn't make a dummy of him. It was no use. So they had to persuade him to mull over whatever made him pull a fast one on us. He didn't want to. By the time he became cooperative they'd overdone the persuading. They'd gone too far. They'd made the whole thing useless."

"Meaning?"

"His mind was turned, same as Haller's. He gabbled a lot of crazy stuff and passed out for keeps."

"And what was the crazy stuff?"

"He said you were an entirely new, redoubtable and completely unsuspected type of mutant. You've a detachable ego. You'd swapped bodies with him against his will. I checked with several of our leading authorities on paranormal aptitudes. They declared it ludicrous, but they knew why Steen told it."

"What was their diagnosis?"

"He'd been hopelessly out-hypnoed by one of his own type far more powerful than himself. You made Steen think he was you for a short time. You made him send Haller off balance, at which point the delusion ran out. Now, limited as I am, I can do some mind-reading of my own. You're thinking that if I don't play your way, you'll put the same sort of bee on me."

"Will I?"

"Either that or dispose of me outright as you did Greatorex. Whichever course you take will be futile. If you fix me up like Steen, it'll wear off, while if you finish me completely, you'll have a mere body on your hands. A body can't call off a so-called war. I'll be less concerned than is Greatorex!" A notion struck him and he demanded, "How did you put paid to Greatorex? What did you do to him?"

"The same as we'll be compelled to do to you, once we're convinced there's no alternative." Raven stared hard at the other. "Get it into your mulish head that we've far fewer compunctions than you when it comes to dealing with an obstacle. We differ from you only in that we make it swift. We don't let the subject linger. *That* is the real crime, to prolong the act of dying!" He paused, finished, "Greatorex went so fast he hardly had time to fight it. Steen was denied that fundamental mercy."

"I told you—"

Raven brushed the words aside. "You're not going to make Venus your personal property and, sometime in the future, help the Martians hold Terra to ransom in her hour of trial. If humanity ever gets in a tight corner, it's going to be humanity that'll fight its way out, *not* just Terrans. So you'll cease all action against Terra and get the Martians to follow suit. Alternatively, you'll be removed from the scene forever, after which we'll deal similarly with your successors, one by one, until the whole movement collapses for lack of leadership." He pointed to the tiny radium chronometer in the ring on Thorstern's middle finger. "You've five minutes to make up your mind."

"I've more than that, much more. I've got just as long as I like." He poked the third photograph across the table. "Take a look at that."

Not picking it up, Raven bent over to see it. His expression did not change in the slightest.

"Who is it?" asked Charles, too lethargic to get up and look or exercise any other visual sense.

"Leina," said Raven.

Thorstern laughed. It was a grating sound. He was enjoying his own foresight to the full. In particular, he was pleased with his success in keeping his mind away from the subject of Leina until this moment. Not once had she drifted through his brain. Again a pawn had outthought a mutant.

"Your woman," he mouthed with unconcealed scorn. "That's all I can call her since you're not married to her. Rather unconventional, aren't you?"

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"Decidedly," agreed Raven.

"Well, we know plenty about her. We know her habits, movements, aptitudes. We know, for instance, that she's another superior breed of hypno like yourself. Steen said so. He wasn't lying, not in that condition. Maybe that's the attraction between you. I can't imagine any other unless you're fond of elephants and—"

"Leave her proportions out of this. Get to the point."

"The point is," said Thorstern, unable to resist showing relish, "that the moment I die, or go nuts, or obviously out of character—" he tapped the picture with a heavy finger—"she pays!"

"That's a laugh," said Raven.

"I hope you'll enjoy it when you find her dead."

"I won't weep," Raven assured. It was by no means sardonic. He made it true, dreadfully true.

EVEN Thorstern thought it horrible. He looked uncertainly at Charles, seeking confirmation in that person's revulsion, and found him mooning boredly at the ceiling. His gaze came back to Raven. It showed disbelief, incredulity.

"She can die slowly."

"Do you think so?"

"I am positive of it. Unless she happens to have a weak heart she can take ten times longer than Steen. How d'you like that?"

"I think it disgusting."

"Eh?"

"The master mind, the mighty conqueror, hides behind a woman's skirts."

Back came the old fury at belittlement, but Thorstern managed to suppress it and say, "That comes well from someone willing to let a woman pay for his sins."

"She won't mind," smiled Raven, giving him a quite unexpected angle.

"You're mad!" declared Thorstern, beginning to believe it.

"Greatorex doesn't mind. Neither does Haller. And Steen is coldly indifferent. Why should Leina care? Why, even you—"

"Shut up, you murderous maniac!" Thorstern surged to his feet, both fists clenched until the knuckles showed white. "You've left it too long. You were so cocky you wanted to chew the fat all night. And we've been overheard, see? You're not the only ones who can poke his nose into other people's business. We've been overheard." He made an ecstatic wave toward the front. "Hear those feet? Twenty of them. Fifty. A hundred. The whole city has been roused."

"Too bad," said Raven, watching him with a sardonic eye.

"Take me and see what it buys you," invited Thorstern, full of guts. "In a moment the rush will come, after which you'll get what you've earned." Trying to look at Raven and at the same time watch the front, he added with emphasis, "Unless I am in complete possession of myself and order them to hold their hands."

"It appears that we're in a bad fix," commented Charles. He bleared in fat reproof. "You'll be the death of me yet." He fastened an anticipatory gaze on the door.

Thorstern was now standing with compressed lips while his mind ran its own untrammeled course. "They won't try anything now. The cost is too great."

Momentarily undecided about the respective merits of pseudolegal and accidental methods of disposing of these enemies, jubilant over the crafty way in which he'd turned the tables on them, he braced himself for the coming inrush and had completely forgotten that his mind was wide open. Not that it mattered now.

Like Charles, his full attention was on the door beyond which he had heard the cautious scuffling of many feet.

He stiffened, noting from a corner of his eye that neither of the others had moved. Teleportatively manipulated, the lock began to turn slowly and apparently of its own accord.

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XIX

INCH by inch the door began to open. A yellowish coil of night fog came through the gradually widening gap. There was utter silence within the room; not even the whispering of a drawn breath. This and the door's slow motion created an immense tension that was almost more than Thorstern could stand.

His eyes were straining, his ears shocked by the total lack of expected uproar, his mind trying to operate along ten channels at once. Who was outside? Did they have weapons ready, fingers taut, triggers already partway back? If he made a mad jump for that opening, would he leap into a deadly volley and go down for ever?

Or had they a telepath to inform them of his intentions so that they'd hold their fire? But, of course, a telepath could not warn them, since he was still hesitating to take a chance. A mind probe could tell what he was thinking and still be unable to forecast a split-second decision.

The few seconds had crawled like eons as he watched the door which now had ceased its motion halfway and remained ajar. Why the devil were they waiting?

More fog sneaked in. He noticed it for the first time and was smitten by a plausible solution. Gas! So they wanted him to stay put until he collapsed along with his captors. Then they'd enter, revive him and give him the other pair to kick.

It was possible that Raven and the fat one knew what was coming. It had sparked brightly within his mind, and they must have caught it, unless they'd been too busy probing the think boxes outside. Can a telepath deal with more than one brain at a time? Can he search several simultaneously? Thorstern wasn't certain.

His nostrils tried to detect the invisible weapon, though he knew that almost certainly it would be odorless. There should be other signs. Eagerly he studied himself, alert for symptoms, and waited a mere half minute that he could have sworn was a half hour. Then he broke.

With an agonized bellow of, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" he sprang into the doorway. "It's me! It's Thor—" His voice died away.

GAZING stupefied into the shrouded night, he posed there a brief while, and his brain broadcast its reactions. "Nobody here. Nobody. They fooled me. They made me hear things, imagine things. Then they turned the lock and swung the door. Hypnos and teleports together. That's multitalented, no matter what the experts may say. The hell devils!" His impulses suddenly boosted to maximum amplitude. "Run for it, you idiot, run!"

Then the unexpected happened. With one hand on the door, bolstered by the certitude that armed search-parties were somewhere in the emptiness before him, Thorstern lifted a foot for the first swift step in his wild dash for safety. His whole body braced for the effort, he stood poised while a thoroughly bewildered expression came into his face. He put the foot down, sank to his knees like one prostrating himself before an unseen god. His thought stream had gone into a violent and unintelligible swirl that flung out odd words and phrases.

"No . . . oh, no, *don't* . . . I can't, I tell you . . . let me alone . . . wasn't my fault . . . oh, let me—"

He toppled forward, writhed as if in soundless pain. Already Raven was bending over him, features tight and serious. Obviously taken by surprise, Charles had come hurriedly out of his chair. Mavis appeared in the opposite doorway, her eyes condemning but her lips saying nothing.

Raven grabbed the stricken man's right hand and immediately the bodily contortions ceased. Lumbering round to the other side, Charles helped carry the

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lax body across the room and dump it in a chair. Mavis closed the door but did not bother to reset the lock. Frowning to herself, she went back to her room.

In a little while Thorstern gulped a couple of times, opened his eyes, pushed himself further into the chair. There were weird thrills running along his nerves and a highly unpleasant sensation like effervescence in his blood stream; his limbs lacked strength and his insides seemed turned to water. His face was colorless, like wax.

Glowering at Raven, he said in trembling tones, "You squeezed my heart."

"Not guilty."

"Then it was *you*." He turned his head to glare at Charles.

"Me, neither. The truth is that we saved you—if you can call it salvation." Charles smiled at a secret thought. "But for us you'd now be one of the late lamented."

"Do you expect me to believe that? One of you two did it!"

"How?" asked Raven, studying him both outwardly and inwardly.

"One of you is a teleport. He unlocked and opened the door without stirring himself. He squeezed my heart the same way. That's what you did to Greatorex."

"A teleport moves objects by exterior influence," Raven contradicted. "He can't reach inside people and rearrange their plumbing. It's impossible."

"I was nearly gone," insisted Thorstern. "I felt my heart being compressed, my body falling. I felt that I was being dragged out of it by main force. Somebody did it."

"Not necessarily. A million die without assistance for every one that is helped."

"I can't die like that." He made it childishly complaining.

"Why not?"

"I'm fifty-eight and there's nothing wrong with me." Gingerly he felt himself, gauged the thumping inside his chest. "Nothing wrong."

"So it seems," said Raven, pointedly. "If I were fated to go naturally of a heart attack, it would be one heck of a coincidence for me to drop at the very moment I'm about to run out on you."

He'd made a good point there, he decided. Pinned it on them effectively. But deep down inside, thrust into an obscure corner where he wouldn't have to look at it—at least, not too often—was the unwelcome idea that perhaps they were right. Maybe his time was more limited by destiny than he'd assumed.

Dragging it right into the light and compelling him to look at it, Raven said, "If you were so fated, it would most likely come at a moment of great strain. So where's the coincidence? Besides, you didn't run. You didn't die. Next week you may do so. Or tomorrow. Or before dawn. No man knoweth the day or the hour." He pointed again at the other's midget chronometer. "Meanwhile, the five minutes have become fifteen."

"I give up." Finding a large handkerchief, Thorstern wiped his forehead. His breathing was labored and he remained sheet-white. "I give up."

IT WAS true. More penetrating minds could see it inside him. A genuine verity formed of a dozen hastily thought up reasons, some contradictory but all satisfying.

"Can't run in top gear forever. Ease down and live longer. Got to look after myself. Why build for someone else's benefit? Wollencott's twelve years younger, fancies he'll be the big boss after I'm gone. Thinks I'm going to work and scheme and sweat for his sake. *Floreat Venusia*—under a stinking mutant. Even Terra does better. Heraty and most of the Council are normals. Gilchrist assured me of that."

Raven made a mental note: Gilchrist, a World Councilor. The traitor in the camp and undoubtedly the character who had betrayed him to the underground headquarters on Terra. The man whose name Kayder and the others didn't know because they did not want

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to know it.

"If it's not one mutant, it'll be another," Thorstern's stream ran on. "One of them will bide his time, take over my empire like taking milk from a kitten. I was safe enough while all attention was on Wollencott, but now they've gone back of him and got at me. The mutants have powers. Some day they'll organize themselves against the common run of men. I wouldn't care to be here then!"

His eyes lifted, discovered the others watching. "I've told you I give up. What more do you want?"

"Nothing." Raven went toward the wall phone. "Like me to call an anti-grav to take you home?"

"No, I'll walk. I want time to decide the best way to cut various strings. Besides, I don't trust you."

He arose shakily, felt his chest again. Within him was suspicion of such ready acceptance of surrender and such casual release. Had they timed something to happen at the other end of the road, well away from this house? Perhaps another squeezing of the heart until he was finished?

"We trust you because of what shows in your mind," Raven told him. "It's your hard luck that you can't see into ours. You won't be touched by us unless you renege."

Going to the door, Thorstern opened it, looked them over for the last time. His face was still pallid and he seemed to have aged somewhat, but he had recovered a measure of dignity.

"I have promised to put a stop to all hostile action against Terra," he said. "That and *no more*!"

He stepped outside, gave his parting shot a touch of incongruity by carefully closing the door behind him. Fifty years ago a tall, bitter woman had boxed his ears for slamming doors and, all unrealized by him, the ears still tingled.

Following the walls, he hurried along the road at the best pace he could muster. General obscurity made it slower than he liked. Now and again he stopped to listen, then hastened on. At this unearthly hour there would be few people about other than restless nocturnals and roaming patrols. He had gone an unknown distance before he detected sounds to his left.

Cupping his hands, he called, "Are you there?"

"Coming!"

They loomed out of the dark yellow haze, six of them, heavily armed. "What's the matter?"

"You're looking for a man named David Raven?"

"Dead right we are. Know where he is?"

"I've just left him. He's—he's—"

He found himself uncertain which way to point. In every direction was the same accursed yellow cloud. He could not remember whether he had stopped in his tracks the instant he heard the patrol or whether he had turned to face them. Maybe he had shifted around still more while talking to them. "He's—"

"Make up your mind, mister."

"I tell you I've just left him." His voice was loud with irritation.

"What d'you mean by 'just'? How long ago?"

Was it two minutes, five, ten or twenty? He squinted at his chronometer, but it told him nothing except the correct time.

"Recently," he said, feeling savage.

"Recently," echoed the leader of the patrol, not bothering to hide his sarcasm. "Not far away." He swept his arm in an indiscriminate semicircle. "Somewhere around there."

"Listen, mister," interrupted the other. "A dope came on the spectro-screen and mentioned this Raven in the same breath as money. We've been on the beat since midnight and so far have had forty-four nutheads offering Raven to us for half the take. So we're fed up, mister." He gave Thorstern a gentle push. "You're out of bed too late and dreaming things. Go home and don't chivvy working men."

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THORSTERN demanded, "Is there a telepath among you?"

"Nary a one," said the leader, seeing no reason to give a detailed list of the types in his patrol. "There are one and a quarter million people and about four hundred thousand houses in this city. Listening outside every house until someone says too much would take a month even with an army of telepaths. There aren't enough to go around, and if you ask me, it's just as well. I've no love for them."

"Neither have I," agreed Thorstern with fevor. He was reluctant to go without devising some way of steering the patrol to a point that he could not now find. They'd give Raven and the fat fellow a run for their money if only he could get them there.

"All right," said the patrol's spokesman, "if you want to stand there smelling the smoke until dawn, you do so. We're going. Don't you worry about Raven. We'll get him eventually but it won't be by night. It'll be in broad daylight when a man can see from here to the Sawtooths."

They vanished into the fog. Another patrol was now coming toward Thorstern from the hidden road on his right. For all he could tell they might all be within spitting distance of his enemies at that precise moment. He knew it was no use tackling them about the matter. No use whatever.

He had promised to cease his new style guerilla war against Terra and that promise he would keep. But it did not cover individual Terrans such as multi-talented mutants with no scruples. The game was not ended and, as he had reminded himself earlier, tomorrow is another day.

XX

BACK in the room Charles stopped his careful listening. "He's muzzy. Doesn't know which way to send them. So he's going home." He crossed heavy legs and patted his stomach. "When he flopped in the doorway, I thought for a moment that you'd taken him. Then I picked up your yelp of surprise."

"And I thought it was you." Raven frowned to himself. "It caught me napping. Good job I got to him so quickly or he'd have been gone."

"Yes, a heart-attack." The moon eyes became quizzical. "Or was it?"

"Somebody was indecently precipitate," said Raven. "Somebody had a one-track mind and couldn't wait to be educated. That's wrong, very wrong."

"Somebody held out a long time and gave up slowly," reminded Charles as if that explained everything. "So the would-be emperor of Venus was mighty lucky. If he had gone, it would have been relatively quickly. Oh, well, he's a hard character with more than his share of fortitude. Nothing else could have scared him into reasonable pacifism."

"I'm glad it ended that way. If he had expired, we'd have had more of this messing around, lots more. Wollencott would have to be dealt with. This surrender has saved a lot of extra grief."

"A surrender with mental reservations," Charles commented. "He couldn't help stewing them while fumbling his way along the road."

"I heard him."

"He's a sticker if nothing else. First, he reserves the right to feed his promise to the ducks if at any future time he can discover a way to make himself absolutely mutant-proof. He estimates the chance of that as a million to one against, but he insists on covering the odd chance. Second, he reserves the right to slap you clean into the next galaxy, but can't imagine a satisfactory method just yet."

"That's not all," contributed Raven. "I'm guessing he'll get in direct touch with the World Council, criticize Wollencott and the underground movement, deplore their deeds, sympathize with Terra and offer to put a stop to the whole business for a worth-while consideration."

"He might, at that."

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"Let him. It's no business of ours. The main purpose has been achieved, and that's all that counts." He mused a while, before saying, "A large and reasonably efficient organization takes a deal of constructing especially when it includes belligerent sections operating outside the law. It's hard to knock down what one has built up with painstaking care."

"And so?"

"Thorstern won't like doing it. He'll call off the hounds but hate to break up the pack. The only thing that would soothe his soul would be to form a bigger and better pack. There's one way he could do that, namely, with the knowledge and approval of the most influential of his recent opponents, including Heraty."

"For what purpose? They don't know of the Denebs and therefore—"

"I told Thorstern that humanity will fight its way out of humanity's fixes. He may remember that. He's ignorant of the Denebs, as you've just said, but may decide—and convince Heraty and others—that the hour of trial is already here. Pawns versus mutants! Being what he is, Thorstern thinks of human beings as solely of his own kind, while mutants are not quite human, or are quasi-human."

"Ah!" Charles narrowed his eyes. "The intolerance exists today. It wouldn't need a lot of boosting."

RAVEN shrugged. "Who knows it better than us? Anyway, I can't see how he can avoid thinking of it sooner or later. He's got brains and courage and he's more than pigheaded."

"It wouldn't be easy. The mutant minority is an exceedingly small one but plenty large enough to make extermination a major problem."

"Numerical ratios aren't the whole of it," Raven declared. "I can see two obstacles, both big."

"Such as which?"

"One, they can wipe out only the known paranormals. How many more are unknown? How many are beyond identification by ordinary minds and intend to remain that way?"

"That makes the job impossible to complete," offered Charles. "Thorstern doesn't strike me as the kind who is willing to do things by half measures. Perhaps he'll lay off when he realizes he's got no choice."

"Maybe he will. It remains to be seen. Obstacle number two is the natural consequence of coexistent civilizations on three planets. Suppose Thorstern tries to persuade them to arrange simultaneous pogroms aimed to rid humanity of its too-clever boys. Each planet immediately senses a trap: if it slaughters its own mutants while the other two do not—" The point gained added significance by being left suspended.

"Mutual distrust." Charles nodded knowingly, a plump clown trying to look profound. "And it could be worse than that. If *two* worlds ridded themselves of their talent and the third did not, boy! how soon could it gain complete mastery of the others. In such an event I could give a shrewd guess at which would be the third world and who'd be bossing it."

"Three worlds can see the same picture. Terrans and Martians are neither more nor less dopy than Venusians. So whichever way Thorstern turns he'll have a tough proposition on his hands. The trouble is he's the sort who likes tough propositions. I don't think we've heard the last of him."

"Neither do I. And, David, we're at the top of his list for summary removal." A chuckle sounded low down in his belly. "*If* he can do it."

"I'm going back. Thanks for the hospitality." Crossing the room, Raven put his head through the inner doorway and said to Mavis, "Good-by, delicious."

"And good riddance, nuisance." She gave him a false scowl that fooled him not at all.

He pulled an atrocious face at her, went outside, waved a careless hand at Charles. "You've been a pal. See you in the morgue."

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XXI

A RARE assortment of craft scattered across the numerous dispersal points of the spaceport. Antigravs, copters, large and small, several ancient autogyros owned by unshaven prospectors, two dapper World Council courier boats, two passenger ships, and, finally, a rusty contraption, half gyro, half motor-cycle, abandoned by some crazy gadgeteer.

Sodium lamps shed a cold, unholy light over this mechanical menagerie. The night mist was still noticeable but had thinned considerably as the huge but invisible sun started to poke its rim over the horizon. In less than an hour the fog would soar and leave the ground clear.

The whole place was heavily but inefficiently guarded with little groups of men lounging near the fuel tanks and repair shops while others mooched singly around the perimeter. Not one of them was mentally alert.

Raven appreciated this common state of mind. He had got to within a hundred yards of the perimeter and was exercising caution. Undoubtedly these guards had been warned to look out for him, and Thorstern's surrender would not have caused that warning to be withdrawn.

Most of these armed watchers were ordinary men, unconscious of power wranglers on this world or any other. A few might be followers of Thorstern, concealed in the shadow of Wollencott, and these would have additional, unofficial orders about what to do should Raven show up. There was no way of telling which was which because one and all were thinking only of the end of their spell of duty and the petty pleasures soon to follow.

This fellow coming near had a vivid imagination filled with a large plate of bacon and eggs. He also had two virtues: he was a roamer and a floater. Raven had watched him for some time, found he was one of the few on an irregular beat, free to wander at will around the grounded machines. Several times he had strained a moment, left the surface and soared over some vessel that he could not be bothered to walk around. The other guards, all apparently earthbound, had observed these occasional floatings with casual disinterest.

DRAWN by what he felt as a mere impulse, the guard ambled around a corner of the little toolshed behind which Raven was waiting. On a similar impulse, coming from he knew not where, he held his chin at a convenient angle. He was most cooperative and Raven smacked the chin, caught the body with its bacon and eggs still whirling, lowered it to ground.

Wearing the other's badged cap and official slicker Raven came from behind the shed and sauntered onto the field. The victim was shorter than he, and the slicker came barely to his knees, but there was a good chance it would not be noticed since there were no guards nearer than two hundred yards. Trouble was most likely to come from a telepath. If one made a pass at him and got a complete blank, he'd know him immediately as more than a mere floater. Then the band would start to play with a vengeance!

Bending his arm to hold the gun in its crook exactly as the other had carried it, Raven came to the passenger ship that was waiting for mail. It was the *Star Wraith*, one of the latest models, fully fueled and ready to blow. There was no one on board. He tensed and soared over it, landing lightly the other side.

For all the diversity of craft around, his choice of an escape vehicle was limited. The gyros, copters and antigravs were strictly localized contraptions. There was nothing but the *Star Wraith* and the pair of courier boats. Either of the latter would do, providing they were fueled.

The nearer courier boat had full tanks and was all set but he passed it by to look at the other. That, too, lacked noth-

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ing but its pilot. Both vessels were without personnel and neither was locked. He preferred the second because there was quarter-mile clearance behind its tail.

Just then a mind behind the toolshed returned from its involuntary vacation, forgot former visions of breakfast, tried to coordinate itself. Raven detected it at once. He had been expecting it, waiting for it. The blow had been enough to gain him a couple of minutes and, he had hoped, that was all he would require.

"What did I run into?" the foggy mind mumbled confusedly. A few seconds, then, "I got slugged!" A pause, followed by an agitated, "My cap! My gun! Some pup of a mangy tree-cat has—"

With a deceitfully casual air Raven rose as if to float over the selected ship. Instead he hit the lock twenty feet up and got inside. Closing the circular door, he snapped its fasteners, made his way to the pilot's seat and sat down.

"Somebody bopped me! Jeepers, he must have been ready." It faded out for a moment, came back in increased strength as the other bellowed both mentally and vocally, "Look out, you dreamers! There's a guy up to something! He pinched my—"

Amid the resulting medley of thought forms that shot from the subject of off duty to on duty four stronger ones emerged from nothingness, felt blindly around ship after ship. They reached the courier boat, touched Raven's mental shield, tried to spike through it, recoiled.

"Who are you?"

He did not reply. The ship went *dum-dum-dum* as its pumps and injectors went into operation.

They were mentalities of a caliber quite different from the host of others milling around, sharp, precise, directable and knew an armor-plated mind when they encountered it.

"Another tele. Won't talk. Got his shield up. He's in that courier KM44. Better surround it."

"Surround it? Not likely! If he lets go a blast, he'll incinerate this part of the circle."

"If it's that fellow Raven, there's going to be some awful ructions because we're supposed to—"

"I tell you we don't know who it is."

"Bet you it's Raven."

The radio dinged and the cause of all the excitement flipped the switch. A hoarse voice from the main control tower promptly burst forth with outraged authority.

"You in KM44, open the lock!"

He didn't respond to that, either. Things were still *dum-dumming* halfway back to the tail. The meters were quivering and a red line on an ivory strip had crept up to a point marked: READY.

"You in KM44, I warn you—"

SMILING, he glanced in the rear-view periscope, saw half a dozen armed men fanned out a couple of hundred yards behind his pipes. His forefinger scratched a button, depressed it for a fraction of a second. Something went *whop!* and the vessel gave a jump and a neat ball of superheated vapor bulleted backward. The advancing six raced madly from the center of the target.

The stud went down a second time and orange-white flames spouted from the rear end. The resulting roar was terrific, but inside it sounded as nothing more than a high moan.

A million miles out Raven set the auto-pilot, examined his rear-view screens for evidence of pursuit. There were no signs of it. The likelihood of being chased from Venus was small because it would be futile. Ships capable of catching the kind he was using had yet to be built.

It was remotely possible, but not probable, that some vessel already in the void might be ordered to try to intercept him. The forward screens and detectors showed nothing noteworthy ahead except one pinpoint of infrared radiation too far away to identify. Prob-

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ably the *Fantôme* homeward-bound. She should be somewhere around that region.

Content to let the auto-pilot do the work, Raven sat a while in the tiny control cabin and surveyed the awesome spread of the cosmos. His air was that of one who has seen it a thousand times and hopes to see it ten thousand more.

Nevertheless he left the sparkling view, lay in the tiny bunk and closed his eyes, but not to sleep. He shut his eyes the better to open his mind and listen as he had never done to the secret thoughts of ordinary men. The vessel's steady purring did not distract him in the slightest. Neither did the rare *psst!* and momentary flare of colliding particles of cosmic dust.

They could just be heard if one overcame one's fleshly muffling by straining hard enough and concentrating sufficiently. Eerie mental voices vibrating through the endless dark. Many of these impulses lacked amplitude, had flattened wave forms and had become greatly attenuated by travel through illimitable distances. Others were stronger because relatively nearer, but still far, far away.

"Black ship making for Zaxsis. Will let it run."

"They are about to leave for Baldur 9, a red dwarf with four, all sterile. They consider this one a dead loss and aren't likely to come back."

"Spurned the planet but grabbed the largest satellite because it's rich in heliotrope crystals."

"Came down with a squadron of forty and scoured the place from pole to pole. Seemed in a hurry."

". . . off Hero, giant blue-white in sector twelve of Andromeda. One hundred eighty black ships traveling fast in three fan formations of sixty each. A real Deneb expedition."

"Made an emergency landing with two tubes busted. Waggled his palps until we helped him do the repairs. He gave the kids several strings of rainbow beads."

"Enormous black battleship holding eight thousand Denebs has taken possession of lesser moon. Said they'd send a launch to swap trade with us once in a while, but they aren't enthusiastic."

"... . long string of a dozen in hot pursuit."

"Well, she's getting old and gray and wants out, so if two—"

"The convoy streamed straight past, making for the Horse's Head, sector seven, but dropped this half wrecked lifeboat with one ancient Deneb. He says he's sticking around and prospecting for crystals."

"Made up their minds to play safe and char the world all over just because these wave-lattice creatures are shiny, only semivisible and suspiciously un-Deneblike. We chipped in and tickled the load in the armory. It made a mess!"

HAM RADIO had nothing on this, for it was neither radio nor amateur. It was long-range *beamed* telepathy and decidedly professional.

The babble continued during the whole trip. A black ship here, another there, a hundred hell-bent for some place else. Denebs were doing this, Denebs were doing that, landing on some worlds, departing from others, ignoring a good many more, sometimes attracted toward one, sometimes turned away from another, helped or thwarted by these faraway entities according to the unknown rules of an unknown game.

By and large, the Denebs seemed to discard most worlds either at first sight or after a short stay, yet still they kept on searching, poking, probing through an enormous area that was still widening. If one thing could be positively determined about them, it was that they were incurable fidgets.

Raven spent all his time either listening to this talk from the great deeps of infinity or gazing at the unending concourse of stars through the fore observation port. All thoughts of Thorstern, Wollencott and the rest had been put aside; their ambitions and rivalries were of submicroscopic significance

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when compared with mightier events elsewhere.

"Picked a hundred thousand minds before they decided the years aren't long enough to permit going through five hundred millions. So they've gone."

"There's a distinct trend toward Boötes for some reason best known to themselves. Better be ready for their coming that way."

"Laethe, Morcin, Elstar, Gnosst, Weltenstile, Vä, Périè and Klain. Between two and ten thousand on each, all seeking rare minerals. They treat the locals as tame but useless animals, throw them uneatable titbits. All the same, they've been extremely jumpy since—"

It went on and on, unhearable to all but minds naturally equipped for the purpose. No pawn brain could detect them. No Deneb mind either. Atmosphere blanketed them. The warps around giant suns bent the beams a little, had to be estimated and taken into consideration. But in free space, with suitable receivers correctly attuned, most of them got through.

They told of lonely suns and scattered planets as familiarly as mere man would recall the outstanding features of his home town. They identified locales, gave precise sector references and named a thousand names, but not once did any of them mention Terra, Venus, Mars or any of the family of King Sol.

There was no need to refer to those worlds for their time had not yet come.

XXII

A PAIR of six-seater police boats jumped off the Moon and tried to follow the courier on its way in. They were out of luck. It plunged at Terra as if it had fifty light-years yet to go, shot sidewise when far ahead of the pursuit, vanished over the planet's eastward limb. By the time the others curved round to that hemisphere the boat had landed and become lost in more scenery than twelve pairs of eyes could scrutinize.

It lay on a rocky moor where another takeoff would damage nobody's property. Raven stood by its tail and watched the sky a while but the police boats did not appear above the horizon. Probably they were zooming disconsolately three or four hundred miles to the east or west.

Crossing thick heather, he reached a dirt road, went to the farmhouse he had observed while coming down. He used the phone to call an antigrav cab which came in a short time from a near-by village. Within the hour he was at Terran Intelligence headquarters.

As long-faced and lugubrious as ever, Carson signed to a seat, put his hands together as if about to pray.

"You're a prime headache. You've given me more work to do in a week than usually I get in a month."

"How about the work you gave *me?*"

"That wasn't so tough by the looks of it. You walked out of here and you've walked back. In between times you've annoyed important people and scared the wits out of others. You have thumbed your nose at every existing law, and now I've got to cover you up, somehow, heaven alone knows how."

"What I'd like to know is this: *are* you covering me up? A Moon patrol came after me on the way in despite my being in a courier boat."

"A stolen one." Carson nodded aggrievedly at a bunch of papers on his desk. "I'm on that right now. You'll be whitewashed, don't worry. Where have you planted the boat?"

Raven told him, adding, "I'd have brought it straight into the spaceport but for those cops trying to sit on my neck. Their chase made it look as if I was wanted, and of late I've been wanted quite enough to do me for a time."

"I'll have a pilot pick it up and bring it in." He poked the papers away from him. "Woe, woe, all I get is woe."

"Running from Venus to here takes quite a while even in a courier boat," Raven pointed out. "So I've lost touch. What's happened?"

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CARSON said, "Last week we killed two characters who were trying to bring down an important bridge. Both proved to be Mars-born. Next day a power station went sky high. On Saturday we found on ingenious contraption planted at the foot of a dam and snatched it away in the nick of time.

"On the other hand," Carson went on, "scientists now report that the Dexter blowup almost certainly was a genuine accident. They said the fuel proved to be unstable in certain exceptional and unforeseen conditions. They claim to have found a cure already." He made a gesture of impatience. "It's once in a blue moon I get an authoritative report like that and until I do we're compelled to treat every major accident as something deliberate. Can't even get rid of suspects. We're still holding eight suspects taken from that underground dump. Mars or Venus-born skewboys, every one of them. If I had my way I'd deport them, but it can't be done. They're legally Terrans, see?"

"Yes, that's the trouble." Raven leaned forward. "Mean to tell me that the war's still going on?"

"Can't say for certain. It was continuing up to the end of last week; maybe it's now over." He surveyed the other speculatively. "Day before yesterday Heraty came in to say our worries are ended. There have been no reports of any further incidents since."

"You've heard nothing about a man named Thorstern?"

"I have. For a long time we've had operatives hanging around Wollencott. Eventually two of them sent in reports, saying that one Thorstern was the real driving force behind the movement, but they weren't able to dig up convincing evidence in support."

"That all?"

"No." Carson admitted it with reluctance, not wanting to keep on the subject. "Heraty said that Thorstern is dickering with him."

"Is that so? Did he give any details?"

"He doubted Thorstern's good faith or, for that matter, that he really was what he claimed to be, namely, the man who could call a halt to Venusian intransigence. Thorstern offered to prove it."

"How?"

"Said he'd remove Wollencott." For no obvious reason Carson voiced a loud sigh, finished, "That was the day before yesterday. This morning we received a message from Venus, saying that Wollencott had just fallen out of an antigrav and bounced too hard for his health."

"Umph!" Raven could visualize the wallop, almost hear the crunch of bones. "Nice way to dismiss a faithful servant, isn't it?"

"Better not say that openly. It's libelous."

"I can traduce one or two more. World Councilor Gilchrist, for example. He's your suspected fly in the ointment. Thorstern said so himself, without realizing it." A memory came back and he took it up. "Don't know what Gilchrist looks like but I sniffed around the Council's minds during that interview and I didn't smell a rat. How was that?"

"He wasn't there." Carson scribbled a brief note on a slip of paper. "Four members were absent because of sickness or urgent business. Gilchrist turned up a minute after you left."

"His urgent business was to put a hurried finger on me," Raven stated. "What are you going to do about him?"

"Nothing I can do merely on your say-so. I'll pass this info to Heraty, and the rest is up to the Council."

"You're right, of course. It's of no consequence if they do nothing or even if they award him a medal for being sly. Basically, few things are of real consequence." He stood up, went to the door, paused with a hand on the panel. "There's one item with fair claim to a little weight in so far as anything is weighty. Thorstern is a normal. So is Heraty. You and I are not."

"What of it?" asked Carson uneasily.

"There are men whose nature won't let a defeat go unavenged. There are

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men hard enough to sit in an antigrav and watch a loyal supporter dive to destruction. There are men who can become very frightened if properly stimulated. That is the great curse of this world: fear!" He stared hard at the other, pupils wide, irises shining. "Know what makes men sorely afraid?"

"Death," ventured Carson in sepulchral tones.

"*Other* men," Raven contradicted. "Remember that, especially when Heraty tells you only a little and carefully omits to give you the rest!"

The other did not inquire what he meant. He sat silent, watched Raven go out, watched the door close behind him. Heraty, he thought, was a man to watch carefully.

A tawdry little office up four flights of worn and dirty stairs was the haunt of Samuel Glaustraub, a rudimentary hypno barely able to fascinate a sparrow. Somewhere back in his ancestry there had been one mutant whose talent had skipped a few generations and reappeared greatly weakened. From other forebears he had inherited a legalistic mind and wagging tongue, which features he valued far more than the tricks of any skewboy.

ENTERING this office, Raven propped himself against its short, ink-stained counter and said, "Morning, Sam."

Sam looked up, dark eyes querulous behind horn-rimmed glasses. "Should I know you?"

"Not at all."

The other frowned. He said, "What can I do for you?"

"You've a client named Arthur Kayder?"

"Yes, his case will be heard tomorrow." He shook a sorrowful head. "I shall defend him to the best of my ability but it will be rather hopeless." He gave Raven an apologetic scrutiny. "You're a friend of his, I presume?"

"His best enemy, so far as I know. He may have better ones elsewhere."

"Ha-ha!" approved Glaustraub, his belly quivering. "You are joking of course?"

"Wrong first time, Sammy. I'm the boy he yearns to strip down to a skeleton."

"Eh?" His jaw dropped. "Your name David Raven?"

"Correct."

IT UNNERVED Glaustraub. He took off his glasses, tapped them worriedly, put them on and went around looking for them.

"They're on your nose," Raven informed him. "You're all of a flutter. Anything wrong?"

"I am taken by surprise." He decided to stand. "It is most unusual to find the leading witness against one of my clients—"

"Who said I was a witness against him?"

"That is what I've assumed. Since it is obvious that you have returned in time to appear on behalf of the prosecution, I—"

"Supposing I don't appear? What does the prosecution do then?"

"Proceeds just the same. The recorded evidence is deemed sufficient to secure conviction."

"Yes, but that's only because my testimony in support can reasonably be taken for granted. What if I say I knew Kayder was kidding?"

"Mr. Raven, you mean—" Glaustraub's hands started trembling. "You really think that?"

"Like heck I do."

"Then why—why—"

He stared around in a state of hopeless confusion.

"I'd rather kill a man outright than let him waste years in clink. Besides, if the positions were reversed, Kayder wouldn't do as much for me."

Glaustraub spent most of a minute trying to follow the logic of that remark. Giving it up with the vague feeling that he'd been outsmarted somewhere or other, he asked, "Are you willing to ap-

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pear as witness for the defense?"

"Not if there's an easier way out."

"You could swear an affidavit," he suggested, filled with a curious mixture of doubt, suspicion and hope.

"That'll do me, Samuel. Where do I swear it?"

Glaustraub grabbed a hat, slammed it on back to front. He shoved past the counter, opened the door. "Come with me, if you please."

Taking his caller at a sedate gallop down two flights, Glaustraub ushered him into another office occupied by four men, all overweight. With their aid he concocted a document which Raven read carefully and signed.

"There you are, Sam."

"This is generous of you, Mr. Raven." His hands loved the affidavit, his eyes gleamed, his mind pictured the coming master stroke when Glaustraub, for the defense, arose amid breathless silence and in calm, confident, well modulated tones, proceeded to snitch the prosecution's breeches. There would be opportunity for drama such as he'd never enjoyed before, and he looked forward to exploiting it to the full. Glaustraub for once was supremely happy. "Exceedingly generous, if I may say so. My client will appreciate it."

"That's the idea," said Raven. "When a bunch of bums comes after one's scalp there's nothing like a little gratitude for sowing discord in the ranks."

XXIII

WHEN Raven approached the house, all was quiet and peaceful. Leina was within. Your woman, Thorstern had called her, making it sound reprehensible. He had been right in suggesting that their association did not conform to the customs of humanity, utterly wrong in implying that there was anything immoral about it.

Pausing by the gate, Raven examined a crater in the field outside. The hole was big enough to swallow an antigrav cab. Apart from this queer feature the house and its surroundings were exactly as he had left them.

He went to the front door, turned its lock teleportatively, in the same way that Charles had opened the castle gate. It swung wide. Leina was waiting in the lounge, big hands folded in her generous lap, her eyes showing gladness.

"I'm a bit late." He did not offer any warmer greeting; neither did he kiss her. The warmth was felt without need of expression, while in the present peculiar circumstances a kiss would have been futile. He had never kissed, never wanted to, never been expected to. "I stopped to take the bite off Kayder. Things have changed."

"Things never change," she observed.

"The little things have changed. I am not referring to the big ones."

"The big ones are all-important."

"You're right, bright eyes, but I don't agree with what you imply, namely, that the little things are unimportant." Under her steady, mildly accusing gaze he found it needful to justify himself. "We don't want them to fall foul of the Denebs. Neither do we want them to destroy themselves."

"The latter would be regrettable but not dangerous. The Denebs would learn nothing."

"They'll never be any wiser as it is."

"That may be," she conceded, "but you have sown a few seeds of knowledge. Sooner or later you will be forced to uproot them."

"Womanly intuition, eh?" He grinned like a mischievous boy. "Mavis felt the same way about it."

"With reason."

"When the time arrives the seeds can be obliterated, every single one of them. You know that, don't you?"

"Of course. You'll be ready and I'll be ready. Where you go I shall go." Her brilliant optics were unblinking. "Yet I still think your interference was unnecessary and extremely risky."

"Risks have to be taken sometimes. Would you rather have let them go to unforeseeable lengths, perhaps to com-

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plete extermination?"

"For one thing," she said, undisturbed, "I doubt whether they'd go that far no matter how unlimited their folly. For another, if they did, it would be the lesser of two evils."

"Where possible I prefer to have it both ways. The war is off. In theory, humanity is now able to concentrate on getting farther out."

"Why do you say, 'in theory'?"

HIS FACE sobered. "There's a slight chance that they'll let the opportunity go by in favor of having another and different conflict."

"I see." Going to the window, she stood with her back toward him and looked out over the landscape. "David, in that event will you again insist on taking part?"

"No. Such a war would be against our kind and those thought to be of our kind. So I won't be given the opportunity to chip in. I'll be smacked down without warning, if they can do it." He came and stood beside her. "They may deal with you in the same way. Do you mind?"

"Not in the least, so long as everything remains covered."

"It mightn't happen, anyway." His gaze followed hers and abruptly he changed the subject. "When are you buying the ducks?"

"Ducks?"

He indicated the crater. "For that pond you've had started over there." Without waiting for a reply, he insisted, "What happened?"

"I came back from town last Friday afternoon, made to open the door, sensed something inside the lock."

"What was it?"

"A tiny sphere like a blue bead with a white spot on it. I could see it with my mind. It was positioned so that a key would press on the spot. So I 'ported it out, laid it over there and let a pebble drop on the white mark. The house shook."

"Some mini-engineer took a big chance," he commented. "Even the teleport who placed it had to risk a momentary distraction." Once more his strange callousness revealed itself as he said, "If the trick had worked as intended, nobody would have been more surprised than you."

"One person," she corrected. *"You!"*

The night was exceptionally clear, the stars bright and beckoning. Lying in a tilted-back chair under the roof's glass dome, Raven closed his eyes and listened. Beside him in a similar chair Leina did the same. These were their nights, in the chairs beneath the dome, looking and listening. There were no bedrooms in the house, no beds. They did not need them. Just the chairs and the dome.

On Terra and beyond Terra something always was happening. Nor did incidents come twice the same. This was the work of the eternal watcher, a responsible job and highly essential. Others shared it elsewhere, Charles and Mavis on Venus, Horst and Karin on Mars, and more.

His mind turning to this last couple, he watched the pink light hanging low in the sky and called, "Horst! Horst!"

It came after a long while, weakened by Terra's atmospheric blanket, "Yes, David?"

"Know what your insurgents are doing?"

"Mostly arguing with each other, David. They've split into several groups. The largest group is disgusted with everything and about to break up."

"So they're going through a period of chronic indecision?"

"That's about it."

"Thanks, Horst."

He redirected his mind. "Charles! Charles!"

This time it came quicker and with more strength. "Yes, David?"

"Any news?"

"Thorstern left for Terra yesterday."

"Know what for?"

"No, but I'll make a guess. It's for something profitable to himself."

"Well, I'll watch for him when he gets

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here. Let you know what I discover."

"Do that. You've heard about Wollencott?"

"I have. Nasty business."

"Clumsy," Charles agreed. "He might have landed in some soft place and suffered injuries that meant slow dying. As it happened he didn't, but it was sheer luck." His mental beam cut off a moment, came back. "Here the organization seems to be reluctantly falling to pieces, but its potential will remain and it can be rebuilt anytime. I can't help wondering."

"And I know why."

"Why?"

"Mavis keeps reminding you you've blundered."

"True," said Charles. "And I know why you've guessed it."

"Why?"

"Leina keeps telling you the same."

"Correct," Raven admitted. "We've agreed not to agree."

"Same here. You'd think I was a juvenile delinquent the way she looks at me. The main issue will be protected no matter what happens, so why do the women get the heebies?"

"Because they look at these worlds from a feminine viewpoint and it's a maternal one. You and I have been throwing the baby too high. It makes them nervous to watch us."

"Probably you're right. But how do you know all this? How many babies—"

"I use my imagination," interrupted Raven. " 'By, Charles."

ALL he got back was a telepathic grunt. He glanced at Leina. She was lying back, her eyes closed, her face to the stars. For a little while he studied her and was not looking at the surface features visible to ordinary men. The face was no more than a fleshy mask behind which he could see the real Leina.

She was quite unconscious of his scrutiny for her mind was tuned elsewhere and absorbing the never-ending chatter of the heavens. Soon he followed her example, listened to messages dimmed by Terran atmosphere but still discernible.

"Scouting warily around Bluefire, a condensing giant. Twenty black ships of destroyer type."

". . . repeatedly but complete lack of common ground makes it impossible to communicate with these Flutterers. Can't even make them sense that we're trying to speak to them, much less warn them. If the Denebs arrive and become hostile toward them, we'll have to take appropriate action and—"

"I'm calling from Thais. Got in right away without arousing the least suspicion. Struck lucky with one who had superswift coordination and said, 'Yes, by all means.' "

". . . poor savages have chosen us for their annual sacrifice to the Twin Suns. It won't be long now. Somebody else had better make ready to take over in our place."

That last message bit into Raven's being. He stirred, sat up, felt restless. The stars blazed down but the void around them was deep and dark, bitterly dark.

XXIV

OVER the following three weeks Raven kept close watch on world news given over the radio and spectroscreen networks. It was boringly uneventful but he stuck to the task in the dogged manner of one who waits for something that must not be missed although it may never come.

No mention of erstwhile anti-Terran activities came over the air. This was not remarkable. There had been no hint of anything of the sort even when they were at their height. Privately willing to concede the existence of a war, Terra's powers-that-be refused to admit the fact in public.

Neither was anything said about development of space-ships or the prospects of plunging farther into unknown deeps. Bureaucratic love of secrecy again was responsible. What constitutes legitimate news was decided by the type of mind that insists that matters of ma-

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jor public interest must not be divulged in the public interest."

At the end of the third week the fully-colored, three-dimensional spectroscreen started a new serial of four parts. Just another of a regular series of so-called thrillers, it featured a telepathic hero who had looked repeatedly into the non-mutant heroine's mind and found it pure and sweet and clean. The villain was depicted as a low-browed, lower-minded insectivocal with a lopsided sneer and a penchant for the sinister fondling of centipedes.

It was trash of the kind designed to occupy minds that otherwise might find time to think. Nevertheless, Raven watched the whole performance with the avidity of an incurable addict. When the end came, the villain had been foiled, virtue had triumphed amid soft lights and falling rose petals, and a symbolic boot had crushed a symbolic centipede. He sighed like one satiated, then went to see Kayder.

The man who answered his ring was a pawn resembling a broken-down pugilist. He had a bent nose, ragged ears and was wearing a gray sweater.

"Kayder in?"

"Don't know. I'll see." His small, sunken eyes measured the caller carefully. "Who'll I say?"

"David Raven."

It meant nothing to him. He shambled down the passage, his mind reciting the name as though it would slip away if he didn't keep a half lock on it. Presently, he returned.

"Says he'll see you."

Legs bowed and arms swinging level with his knees, he conducted Raven to the back of the house, announced in a hoarse voice, "Mr. Raven," and lumbered away.

IT WAS the same room as before, same ornaments, same desk, but the boxes had gone. Kayder stood up as he entered, tried to decide whether or not to offer his hand, finally contented himself with indicating a chair.

Raven sat, stretched his legs out, smiled at him. "So Sammy did it. He had his little hour."

"The case was dismissed on payment of costs," Kayder told him. "It set me back a hundred credits but was cheap at the price." His face quirked as he added, "The old buffoon on the bench saw fit to warn me that even evidence like yours wouldn't save me if I abused the communication channels a second time."

"Probably Sammy annoyed him by overdoing the drama," Raven ventured. "Anyway, all's well that ends well."

"It is." Kayder leaned forward, eyed him expectantly. "And now you've come to collect?"

"An astute assumption rather crudely expressed," said Raven. "Let us say that I've come to put the squeeze on you."

Pulling open a drawer, Kayder looked resigned. "How much?"

"How much what?"

"Money."

"Money!" Raven eyed the ceiling, his expression pained. "He talks about money!"

Kayder slammed the drawer shut. "Look, I want to know something. Why did you get me in bad one minute and lug me out the next?"

"They were different minutes."

"Were they? In what way?"

"In the first there was a conflict, and you were a menace safer out of the way. In the second, the trouble had ceased or was about to cease, and the need to pin you down had vanished."

"So you know the war is off?"

"Of course. Haven't you had orders to that effect?"

"Yes," said Kayder, sourly. "And I don't like it. The entire movement is going rapidly to pot."

"Which is all to the good. You were fighting for self-government—if the secret dictatorship of one man can be called self-government."

"Wollencott was a natural born leader but he hadn't the guts to be a dictator."

"He didn't need to have them," said Raven. "The intestinal items were sup-

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plied by Thorstern."

Kayder raised a surprised eyebrow. "Why drag Thorstern into this?"

"You know of him?"

"Every Venusian knows of him. He's one of the planet's seven biggest men."

"He's the biggest," Raven corrected. "So big, in fact, that he thinks Venus ought to be his personal property. He owned Wollencott body and soul until he gave him his freedom recently."

"Gave him his freedom? You mean—"

"We can put two and two together, can't we?"

His mind stimulated into furious thought, Kayder sat erect and let his fingers tap on his desk.

After a while, he growled, "It could be. I've never met Thorstern in person. Few have if it comes to that. But he's generally thought of as a hard and ambitious character. If Wollencott was picking up steam from someone else, Thorstern is the likeliest source." He frowned again. "I never suspected him. He kept himself well concealed."

"He did."

"Thorstern! Ye gods!" He gazed levelly at the other. "Then why did he get rid of Wollencott?"

"He was persuaded to give up his systematic bleeding of Terra and confine himself to more legitimate activities. So Wollencott, a former asset, promptly became an embarrassing liability. Thorstern has a way of dealing with liabilities."

"I hate to believe all this," remarked Kayder, with some resentment, "but I've got to. I know Wollencott is dead. I know the movement is falling apart. It all adds up."

"Your mind says more," Raven pointed out. "It says the anti-Terran movement has divided into splinter groups, and you fear that some may try to curry favor with the powers-that-be by ratting on the others. You think there are now too many people who know too much."

"I'll take my chance along with the rest," said Kayder, grimly. "I've less on my conscience than some."

"Is a hypno named Steen on your conscience?"

"Steen?" He rocked back. "I was after him at the same time I was chasing you. I never got him."

"He died. Very slowly."

"So did Haller," Kayder shot back with sudden vim.

"Wrong on two counts. Haller went more or less of his own volition. Above all, he went quickly."

"What's the difference? One's as dead as the other."

"The difference is not in their ultimate condition," said Raven seriously and with emphasis, "but in the speed of their transition to it. Once upon a time you evinced a nasty desire to reduce me to my framework. Had you done it with praiseworthy swiftness, I could have passed it off with a light laugh." He gave a light laugh by way of illustration. "But if you had prolonged the process unjustifiably, I would have resented it."

KAYDER'S eyes popped and he exclaimed, "That's about the craziest piece of talk I've ever heard!"

Raven said, "It's a crazy trinity of worlds we're in."

"I know that, but—"

"Besides," he continued, ignoring the interruption, "you've not yet heard the half of it. I didn't come round merely to pay a social call and indulge an hour's idle chatter. I did you a favor. Now I want you to do one for me."

"Here it comes!" Kayder regarded him with undisguised suspicion. "What's the favor?"

"I want you to kill Thorstern should the necessity arise."

"Aha, you do? Look, you saved me something, though I don't know what. The maximum was seven years in clink, but I might have got away with six months. Let's say you saved me six months upward. Do you think that's worth a murder?"

"You've overlooked my qualifying words, namely, should the necessity arise. If it does arise, it won't be mur-

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der. It'll be summary execution."

"Who's going to say when the time has come?" asked Kayder, looking shrewd.

"You."

"In that case, I'll never reach a decision."

"Don't recall you being so finicky a few weeks ago."

"I've had enough. I'm going to carry on with my trading business and behave myself, providing other folk leave me alone. I'd be glad to do you a favor but you ask too much."

"I'm asking very little."

"Too much," Kayder repeated. "Why don't you do your own dirty work?"

"A fair question," Raven conceded. "There are two excellent reasons."

"Yes?"

"For one, I've already drawn too much attention to myself and am anxious not to attract more. For another, if the need to remove Thorstern arises, there's every likelihood that the first sign of it will be my own departure from this vale of tears."

"You mean—"

"I'll be dead."

Kayder said, "You know what's in my mind. I'm indebted to you enough so that when you're dead I won't be especially glad. But it's no use pretending I'll be sorry, either."

"You'll be sorry."

"Care to tell me why?"

"Because it may mean you're next."

"Next for what?"

"Being wiped out of this world."

Standing up, Kayder spread hands on his desk and spoke harshly. "You're getting at something. Who's going to wipe me out? Why should I be on the same list as you?"

Waving him down and waiting for him to compose himself, Raven answered, "From the viewpoint of the masses we share one thing in common—neither of us is a normal."

"What of it?"

"People generally are leery of paranormals. It can't be said that they love them."

"I'm not love-starved. I'm used to their attitude." Kayder gave a careless shrug. "It's a form of envy of those better endowed by nature."

"It's also an instinctive wariness approaching fear. It's a natural and ineradicable part of their defense mechanism. Some remarkable things can be done with fear if you can arouse it to sufficient intensity, control it and direct it."

Kayder considered it a while and gave his conclusions. "I can't read another man's mind, but that doesn't mean I'm dopy. I can see where you're going. You think Thorstern may try to regain power of a different but equally satisfactory kind by stirring up an anti-mutant crusade?"

"He might. He used the aptitudes of mutants such as yourself to further his schemes. Now, the way he looks at it, the same or similar aptitudes thwarted him, denied him victory, even menaced his life. Being himself a normal he probably thinks that he could gain fresh ascendancy over his fellows only if all of them were normals too. There would be endless scope for his abilities in a civilization devoid of mutants."

"All this is sheer speculation," Kayder objected.

NODDING agreement, Raven said, "Just that and no more. Nothing may happen. Thorstern's drive may go in quite innocuous directions. If so, there will be no need to take action against him."

"He'd be playing a mighty dangerous game if he tried it. Mutants may be few in number but once united by a common peril from the hordes of—"

"You're thinking along my original lines," Raven interrupted. "I've switched from them since. Thornstern is fifty-eight. These days, people live to a hundred and retain their faculties into the late nineties. So, barring accidents or assassination, he's got a good while to go."

"What difference does that make?"

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"He can afford to be patient and take a longer way 'round to achieve the same results by less arduous means."

Kayder blinked and suggested, "Make it a bit clearer."

"Way back in the past," Raven explained, "some wiseacre remarked that the most effective technique is not to fight a thing but to set its own parts fighting one another."

It registered like a shock.

"Change your way of thinking," Raven went on. "Go from the general to the particular. There's no such creature as a standardized mutant. The word is nothing more than the collective name for a biped menagerie." He watched the other as he added, "And, being what you are, I'll bet you consider insectivocals to be the cream of the crop."

"An equivalent notion is nursed by telepaths," observed Kayder, pointedly.

"That's a jab at me, but no matter. Each variety of mutant thinks itself superior to the others. Each is as suspicious and jealous as any mere pawn. Such a state of mind can be exploited. Mutants are humans with all the faults and follies of humans. Brother Thorstern, being an instinctively good psychologist, won't overlook that fact."

By now Kayder's mind had readjusted. He could see the possibilities and was compelled to acknowledge their existence. The picture was anything but a rosy one.

"If he tries this out, how d'you think he'll start?"

"Systematically," said Raven. "First of all, he'll gain the secret support of Heraty, the World Council and influential normals on three planets. His next step will be to correlate all data on mutants that can be assembled from every available source, analyze it, reach a positive decision as to which two types exercise the most destructive powers and therefore are the most dangerous. Then he'll choose one of those types to play the part of ye goodde and faythfulle knight, the other for the role of baby-eating dragon. It's simple."

"And—"

"Let's say he decides the most effective play is to persuade the pyrotics to exterminate the insectivocals. Forthwith the propaganda services of three worlds start mentioning insectivocals in a most casual way but in an unflattering context. This continues, building up prejudice against them, showing them in an increasingly unfavorable light until eventually most humans—by which I mean normals and other-type mutants alike—subconsciously think of insectivocals as prize stinkers with no competition."

"Hell in a mist!" rasped Kayder.

"That much having been achieved, along comes insidious suggestions that insectivocals hate pyrotics because of the latter's bug-killing powers. From time to time there are gentle hints that it's a good thing we have pyrotics around to take care of us."

"Like heck it is!"

"At the proper moment—and don't forget that correct timing is all-important—a well advertised official speech is made in defense of insectivocals, appealing for unity and tolerance and authoritatively denying an absurd rumor that educated bugs plan to take over the planet trinity with the aid of treacherous insectivocals. That does a lot of good. It makes the public, again including other-type mutants, think there's no smoke without fire."

"They won't swallow all that guff," protested Kayder, inwardly knowing that they might.

"The public will swallow anything providing it appears to bear the seal of official approval and is sufficiently long sustained and plays upon their fears," retorted Raven. He continued, "Imagine they're now thoroughly aroused. What comes after?"

"You tell me."

"Something to trigger the situation thus created." He sought for an example. "A skeleton is purposefully found on its face in the Sawtooths and gets a

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hundred times more publicity than it deserves. An inspired rumor flies around that an innocent pyrotic has been stripped down by an insectivocal. Further emotion-arousing fairytales follow right afterward. A picked rabble rouser gets a mob on the run when, by a most remarkable coincidence, the police are busy elsewhere. Before you know it, you and every other identifiable insectivocal will be racing for dear life with a howling pack of normals after you, other-type mutants in the lead and pyrotics panting to get at you first."

COMPREHENSION spread slowly over Kayder's face. "While Thorstern sits back and smiles?" he asked.

"You've got the idea, chum. With the aid of scared humanity he roots out the last findable insectivocal and makes the type extinct. Then follows a carefully calculated period of peace and tranquillity before the propaganda services start their new buildup on the next victims, mini-engineers for example."

"He'll never do it," declared Kayder.

"Maybe not, maybe yes! Did you see that last serial on the spectroscreen?"

"No."

"You missed something. It featured mutants. The hero was a telepath and the extremely obnoxious villain was an insectivocal."

"He'll never do it," repeated Kayder in louder tones. A pulse was beating in his forehead. "I'll kill him first!"

"That's all I ask. I came to you because you owe me a favor. Also because recently you were the boss of a collection of talent and probably can call on it again. Leave Thorstern alone to live in peace, but watch to see which way he's going. If you can see that, for the second time, he's going to create human disunity—"

"He won't live long enough to do it," Kayder promised. "And I'll be doing you no favor. I'll be protecting myself." He eyed Raven calculatingly. "Just as a guess, I'll say you'll need protecting long before I do. What plan have you?"

Raven stood up and said, "None."

"None?" Kayder's eyebrows arched in surpise. "Why not?"

"Perhaps, unlike you, I'm unable to take action with regard to myself. Or perhaps I want to be a martyr."

XXV

BACK at the house, Raven sprawled in a pneumaseat and said to Leina, "There's going to be more interference if events make it desirable. But not by our kind. Human schemes will be countered by humans. Are you happy about that?"

"I'd have liked it better if that had been arranged in the first place," she gave back a little tartly.

"The unfortunate thing was that it couldn't be arranged. The circumstances were not the same as now. Terra couldn't defend herself effectively without hurting herself by knocking the heads off her own children. Besides, she *needs* Venusian fuels and non-ferrous metals, she *must* have the Martian jumping-off posts of Phobos and Deimos to get further into space."

"How far they get is of no consequence, of no importance whatever."

"They're entitled to their tiny fragment of destiny, aren't they?" He threw her a quizzical look.

She breathed a sigh of resignation. "The trouble with males is that they never grow up. They remain hopeless romantics." Her great eyes were penetrating as they rested upon him. "You know perfectly well that these puny bipeds are entitled to nothing but preservation from destruction at the hands of the Denebs."

"Have it your own way," said Raven, giving up the argument. There was no point in pursuing it with her; she was too utterly right.

"Furthermore," she went on, "I have been listening while you were busy with less weighty affairs. Twelve black ships have been reported in the region of Vega."

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He stiffened, said, "Vega? That's the nearest they've come so far."

"They may come nearer. They may arrive here in the end. Or they may shoot off in some other direction and not be seen in this cosmic sector for ten thousand years. All I can tell you is that at present they're closer than they've ever been." She did not add more but he knew what she was leaving unsaid, namely, "This is a bad time to take foolish risks."

"An error in tactics doesn't matter where there is power to conceal it and recover," he pointed out. "I think I'll go catch up on the news."

UPSTAIRS, he reclined and opened his mind and sought to extract from the general babble that portion emanating from the region of Vega. It was not easy. Too many talking at once.

"The tripedal hoppers of Raemis fled into the damp marshlands and are fearfully declining all contact with the Denebs. The latter appear to think the world unsuitable for any purpose. They are making ready to depart."

". . . twisted the pilots' minds and turned the entire convoy toward Zebulam, a near-nova in sector fifty-one of the Chasm. They're still bulleting along under the delusion that they're on correct course."

"They got the fright of their lives when this cruiser came out of the dark and fastened tractor beams upon them. It didn't take the Denebs one-thousandth of a time unit to realize that the ship they'd caught was a crude contraption designed by comparative savages. They let it go unharmed."

". . . twelve in fan formation still heading toward Vega, blue-white in sector one-ninety-one, edge of the Long Spray."

Raven sat up and gazed at the sky. The Long Spray gleamed across the zenith like a gauzy veil. Terrans called it the Milky Way. Between here and one significant gleam in the dark were a thousand worlds to divert the attention of oncoming ships. But they might persist on course, ignoring other attractions. When left alone to go their own sweet ways, the Denebs were unpredictable.

The end foreseen by Leina arrived after another three weeks. During that time neither radio nor spectroscreen made mention of recent interplanetary animosities, while their other offerings revealed no identifiable trend in any special direction.

Elsewhere, twelve long, black ships of space had nosed a quarter turn to starboard and now were approaching the eight planets of a minor binary system. Temporarily, at least, the drive toward Vega was arrested.

Altogether this day could not have been more peaceful, uneventful, without promise of anything to disturb its tranquillity. The morning sun shone down, bright and warm. The sky was a clear blue bowl marred only by a streak of cloud low on the eastward horizon and a great curving vapor-trail rising into the stratosphere. Once more the *Fantôme* was Venus-bound.

A four-seater copter was the first indication that errors must be paid for, that the past has an unpleasant way of catching up with the present. It droned out of the west, landed near the crater which already was producing a crop of colorful weeds.

Getting out, its only occupant examined the hole in the ground, scuffed some dirt near its edge, gave up the problem of what had caused it and went to the house. Leina admitted him.

A young, well-built type with frank, eager features, he was a very junior operative of Terran Intelligence, a subtelepath able to probe minds but without a shield for his own. From the viewpoint of those who had sent him he was an excellent choice for his especial mission. Essentially he was open and disarming.

"My name is Grant," he introduced himself. Conditioned by his own status he spoke vocally. "I've come to tell you that Major Lomax, of Terran Intelli-

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gence, would like to see you as soon as convenient."

"Is it urgent?" Raven asked.

"I think so, sir. He instructed me to bring you and this lady in the copter if you were ready to leave at once. If not, I am to make an appointment at a time suitable to yourselves."

"Oh, so he wants *both* of us? Do you know what it is about?"

"I'm afraid not, sir." Grant's expression was candid and his unprotected mind confirmed his words. So far as he was concerned, this was a routine chore of taking a couple of people to an interview with his superior.

"Couldn't the major have come here with you?"

Grant became slightly embarrassed. "Possibly, sir. I don't know why he didn't. There must be a reason. It is not for me to question—"

"Never mind. We understand your position." Raven gave Leina an inquiring glance. "Might as well get it over now. What do you say?"

"I'm ready." Her voice was low, her eyes brilliant as she studied the visitor.

HIS face flushing, Grant fidgeted and prayed for some means of closing his mind which insisted on thinking, "She is looking into me, right inside of me, right at where I'm hiding inside myself. I wish she couldn't do that. Or I wish I could look at her the same way. She is big and cumbersome—but very beautiful."

Leina smiled but made no remark, not wanting to add to his manifest discomfort by showing that his thoughts had been read. She shifted her attention.

"I'll get my coat and handbag, David. Then we can go."

When she reappeared they went to the waiting machine which rose smoothly under whirling vanes and drifted westward. Nobody said anything during the hour's flight. Grant kept strictly to business, handled the controls, maintained his thoughts in polite and disciplined channels. Leina studied the bright landscape below, giving it the undivided attention of one who is seeing it for the first time—or the last. Raven closed his eyes and attuned himself to calls far above the normal telepathic band.

"David! David!"

"Yes, Charles?"

"They are taking us away."

"We, too, Charles."

The copter lost altitude, floated down toward a stark and lonely building upon a windswept moor. It was a squat, heavily built edifice resembling an abandoned power station or perhaps a one-time explosives dump.

Touching earth, the machine jounced a couple of times, settled itself. Grant got out, self-consciously helped Leina down. With the others following, he went to the armor-plate front door, pressed a button set in thick concrete at its side. A tiny trap in the armor plate opened like an iris diaphragm, revealed a scanner peering at them glassily.

Apparently satisfied, the trap closed over the eye. From behind the door came a faint, smooth whir of machinery as huge bolts were drawn aside.

"Like a fortress, this place," remarked Grant, innocently conversational.

The door swung open. The summoned pair stepped through. Turning on the threshold, Raven said to Grant, "It reminds me of a crematorium."

Then the armor plate cut him from view and the bolts slid back into place. Grant stood a moment, staring at the door, the concrete, the great windowless walls. He felt cold, cold.

"It does at that. What a lousy thought!"

Moodily he took the copter up, noticing that somehow the sun had lost much of its warmth.

Behind the door stretched a long passage down which a distant voice came drifting. "Please continue straight ahead. You will find me in the room at the end. I regret not being there to meet you but I know you will forgive me."

Seated in a chair behind a long, low

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desk, Major Lomax proved to be a lean individual in his early thirties. He had light blue eyes that gazed fixedly and rarely blinked. His fair hair was cropped to a short bristle. The most noteworthy feature was his extreme pallor. His features were white, almost waxy and one side of them had a permanent tautness.

Indicating a two-person pneumaseat, the only other resting place in the room, Lomax said, "Kindly sit there. I thank you for coming so promptly." The blue eyes went from Raven to Leina and back again. "I apologize for not escorting you from the door. It is difficult for me to stand, much less walk."

"I'm very sorry," sympathized Leina.

There was no easy way of detecting the reaction. A swift probe showed that Lomax was a top-grade telepath with an exceptionally efficient shield. His mind was closed as securely as could be done by any human. Despite that, they might have riven this defense with a simultaneous and irresistible thrust, but by mutual consent they refrained from trying.

MOVING a thin pile of typewritten papers in front of him, Lomax continued in the same cool, unemotional voice as before.

"I don't know whether you now suspect the purpose of this interview, nor can I foretell what action on your part may be precipitated by it, but before we begin I want you to know that my function is prescribed here." He tapped the papers. "It has been worked out for me in complete detail, and all I must do is follow it through as written."

"You make it sound ominous," offered Raven.

Picking up the top sheet, Lomax read from it. "First, I have to give you a personal message from Mr. Carson, head of Terran Intelligence, to the effect that when informed of this interview he disapproved of it, opposed it by all legitimate means at his command, but was overruled. He wishes me to convey his sincere regards and assure you that no matter what may take place in this building he will always hold both of you in the greatest esteem."

"Dear me," said Raven. "This is getting worse."

Lomax let it go by with complete impassivity. "This interview will be conducted only on a vocal basis. It is being recorded for the benefit of those who arranged it."

Putting the top sheet aside, he picked up the next one and continued in the same robotlike way. "It is essential that you know I have been chosen for my present task because of a rare combination of qualifications. I am a member of Terran Intelligence, a telepath well able to cover his own mind and, lastly, very much of a physical wreck."

Glancing up, he met Leina's great optics and for the first time displayed the faintest shadow of expression in the shape of a vague and swiftly suppressed uneasiness. Like Grant and many others, he was disturbed when looked into so deeply.

He hurried on, "I shall not bore you with the full details. Briefly, I was involved in an unlucky smash and badly injured. I want you to keep that in mind because it is most important. I am in the abnormal mental state of a man who'll be glad to go. Therefore I cannot be intimidated by the threat of death."

"Neither can we," stated Raven, amiably bland.

It disconcerted Lomax a little. He had expected nothing less than a heated and indignant demand as to who was threatening his life. Concealing his surprise, he returned his attention to the papers.

"Further, although I do not fear death I shall be compelled to react to its approach in a quick and effective way. I have undergone a special course of mental conditioning which has created a purely reactive circuit within my mind. It is not part of my normal thinking processes, cannot be detected or destroyed by any other mind probe. This circuit automatically keys in the instant I am in serious danger of losing either

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my life or control of my free personality. It will force me to do something instinctively, *unthinkingly*, the result of which will be the immediate destruction of us three."

Raven frowned and commented, "Somewhere back of you is a badly frightened man."

Ignoring that, Lomax went determinedly on. "What I shall do is not known to me, nor will it be until the very moment I do it. You have nothing to gain by combining to beat down my shield and search my mind for what isn't consciously there. On the contrary, you have everything to lose—your lives!"

XXVI

THE pair on the pneumaseat glanced at each other, did their best to look outwitted and aghast. Lomax had a part to play—but so had they. It was a curious situation without parallel in human annals, for each side was in mental hiding from the other, each was holding a master card in the form of power over life and death, each *knew* that victory for itself was certain.

Looking at Lomax, who refused to meet her gaze, Leina complained, "We came here in good faith, thinking perhaps our help was needed. We find ourselves being treated like common criminals. Indeed, it is worse than that, for no charge has been made against us and we are denied the proper processes of the law. Just what are we supposed to have done to deserve all this?"

"Exceptional methods must be applied to exceptional cases," remarked Lomax, quite unmoved. "It is not so much what you have done as what you may do eventually."

"Can't you be more explicit?"

"Please be patient. I am coming to that right now." He resumed with his sheets. "This is a condensation of facts sufficient to enable you to understand the reason for this meeting. Certain matters brought to the attention of the World Council . . ."

"By a schemer named Thorstern?" suggested Raven, picturing Emmanuel's scowl when that came over the recording system.

". . . caused them to order a thorough inquiry into the nature of your activities, especially during your recent operations on behalf of Terran Intelligence," continued Lomax, stubbornly. "Which inquiry was later extended to this lady with whom you—ahem—reside."

"You make it sound nasty," reproved Leina.

"Data was drawn from a large number of sources considered reliable and the resulting report, which was complete and exhaustive, made President Heraty decide to appoint a special commission to study it and issue a recommendation."

"Somebody must think we're important." Raven slid a glance at Leina who responded with an I-told-you-so look.

"Composed of two World Council members and ten scientists, this commission held that on the basis of the evidence before them you had displayed supernormal powers of eight distinct classifications, six known and two previously unknown. You are both multitalented mutants."

"Is that an offense?" asked Raven.

"I have no personal views concerning this matter." The major leaned forward, held his middle a moment while his face went even whiter. When he recovered, he said, "Kindly permit me to continue. If the evidence had favored no more than that, the World Council would have accepted the fact that multitalented mutants do exist in spite of so-called natural laws. But there are data in support of an alternative theory toward which some members of the commission lean while others reject it as fantastic."

LEINA and Raven stirred on the pneumaseat, showed curiosity and mild interest. No more than that. At every moment they were living the part they wished to play, as determined as Lomax to see it through to the bitter end.

"You are entitled to know the cogent

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items," Lomax carried on. He discarded another sheet. "A careful re-examination of your antecedents shows that both of you might well be persons very much out of the ordinary by our standards of today. It was by substantially the same method that Mr. Carson traced you in the first place and reached the same conclusion."

He paused while his features quirked with an inward strain, then said more slowly, "But the ancestry of David Raven should at best have produced no more than a superb telepath, a mind probe of redoubtable penetrating power and extremely acute receptivity. He could *not* exercise hypnotic or quasihypnotic powers of his own, even as a multitalented mutant, because there is not one hypno among his forebears."

"That may be—" began Leina.

Lomax chipped in, "The same remarks apply to you. They also apply to your two confreres upon Venus, which pair are now having the same kind of interview in similar circumstances."

"With a similar threat hanging over them?" Raven inquired.

Lomax took no notice. Well disciplined, he was answering no questions other than those pertinent to the stage reached in his task.

"Item number two: we discovered that David Raven either had died or shown all symptoms of death and then been resuscitated. The doctor who performed this feat is himself dead and can no longer be called upon for evidence. Such things do happen. It becomes remarkable only when examined in conjunction with other facts." The blue eyes shot a glance at Leina. "Such as the fact that this lady once went swimming, was caught in a powerful undercurrent, apparently drowned, but revived by artificial respiration. There are also the facts that your two prototypes on Venus also have had hairbreadth escapes."

"You've had one yourself," Raven riposted. "You told us so at the beginning. You're lucky to be alive."

Strongly tempted to admit the escape but deny the luck of surviving in his present condition, Lomax plowed grimly on.

"Item number three has indirect significance. You have been told by Mr. Carson of Terran space-ship experiments so there is no harm in adding more. To cut it short, our last exploring vessel went very far into the void. Upon its return the pilot reported that he had been chased by unidentifiable objects of unknown origin. All that his instruments could tell him was that they were metallic and were radiating heat. There were four of them, moving in line abreast at a distance too great for examination with the naked eye. They changed course when he changed and undoubtedly were in pursuit. They had greater maneuverability and far more speed."

"Nevertheless he escaped?" Raven put on an irritatingly skeptical smile.

"The escape is as much a mystery as the pursuit," Lomax reported. "The four were overtaking rapidly when a few strange sparkles and gleamings appeared in front of them, upon which they swung into a reverse course and went away. Our pilot is convinced that these four were artificial fabrications, and his belief is officially endorsed."

"What does this mean to us?"

Taking a deep breath, Lomax declared, "There is other life in the cosmos. Its form, powers, techniques and ways of thought remain matters of pure speculation. It may be humanoid enough to pose as veritable humans, gaining plausibility by using the identities of real humans who have died." He whisked aside another paper. "Or it might be parasitic by nature, able to seize and animate the bodies of other creatures, masquerading thereafter in a guise mighty close to perfection. We have no data to go upon. But we can think, imagine, conceive infinite possibilities."

"Frightened men have bad dreams," observed Raven.

"I think it's all terribly silly," Leina put in. "Are you implying that we may be intelligent parasites from heaven

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knows where?" she sneered.

"Lady, I am implying nothing. I am merely reading papers prepared by my superiors whose conclusions and motives I am not inclined to question. That is my job."

"Where does it get us?"

"To this point: in defiance of the rule that only the dominant talent is inherited, you *may* be multitalented mutants of natural human birth, in which case the laws of genetics will have to be modified. On the other hand, you *may* be a nonhuman form of life, disguised in our shape and form, living among us unsuspected until lately."

"For what purpose?"

MAJOR LOMAX passed a hand over his bristly hair. He looked mentally and physically weary as he answered, "The purposes of other life forms are obscure. We know nothing about them—yet. We can, however, make a justifiable assumption."

"And what is that?"

"Another life form would make contact openly, without attempting concealment, if its intentions were friendly."

"Meaning that surreptitious contact is proof of hostile designs?"

"Exactly!"

Leina said, with some morbidity, "I can think of nothing more absurd than to suggest that human beings are not human beings."

"For the second time, lady," said Lomax, displaying frigid politeness, "I am not making suggestions. I am no more than a deputy appointed to inform you of the conclusions of experts. They say that you two are either multitalented mutants or nonhuman life forms and more likely the latter."

"I think they're impertinent," complained Leina, becoming femininely inconsequential.

Lomax let it pass. "If it should be the case that some other form of life has dumped scouts upon our worlds, unknown to us, the logical deduction is that their ultimate purpose is antagonistic. It's the criminal who climbs in through the back window. The honest man knocks on the front door. Hence this unusual procedure. Alien invaders stand outside our laws and are not entitled to the protection of them."

"I see." Raven rubbed his chin, regarded the other thoughtfully. "What are we supposed to do about all this wild speculation?"

"The onus now rests on you of proving beyond all manner of doubt that you are natural-born humans and not another life form. The proof has to be good and watertight."

XXVII

RAVEN growled in pretended anger, "Darn it, can you prove you're not something out of Sirius?"

"I won't argue with you or permit you to disturb my emotions." Lomax jabbed an indicative thumb at the last sheet of paper. "All I'm concerned with is what it says here. It says you will produce incontrovertible proof that you are human beings, by which is meant the kind of superior life native to Terra."

"Otherwise?"

"Terra will take steps to protect herself by every means available. For a start, she will wipe out all three of us here, simultaneously deal with those on Venus and make ready to repel any later attack launched upon us from outside."

"H'm! All three of us, you say? Tough on you, isn't it?"

"I told you why I was chosen," Lomax reminded him. "I've been assured that the method to be employed will be superswift and painless."

"That is a great comfort," put in Leina.

He eyed them in turn. "I shall go with you to deprive you of the last possible way out. There will be no chance of one of you insuring survival by confiscating my person. No other life form—if such you are—is going to walk out of this trap in the disguise of a man named Lomax. We survive together or die to-

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gether, according to whether or not you produce the evidence my superiors require."

Lomax was slightly pleased about that. For the first time the physical condition he resented had given him power of the most unconquerable kind. In common with those behind him, he was taking it for granted that any form of life, human or nonhuman, would value its survival too highly to share his own abnormal nonchalance about destruction.

In that respect neither he nor those who had planned this situation could have been more mistaken. The difficult thing was for prospective victims to conceal this fact. The essential tactic was not to reveal it outwardly and to give the blind recording apparatus a series of reactions manifestly natural from the human point of view.

SO, IN suitably disturbed tones, Raven remarked, "Many an innocent has been slaughtered by the chronic suspicions and uncontrollable fears of others. The world has never lacked its full quota of smellers-out of witches." He fidgeted as if on edge and asked, "How long do we have to talk ourselves out of the bonfire? Is there a time limit?"

"There is, but it's not on the clock."

"Then on what basis is it fixed?"

"Either you dig up the proof or you don't." Lomax registered tired indifference as to which way it went. "If you can, you'll start trying. If you can't, the knowledge that you can't will drive you to desperation sooner or later. When that happens—" He let his voice trail off.

"You'll react?"

"Effectively! I'm very patient, and you're free to take full advantage of it, but I advise you not to play for time by trying to sit here for a week."

"That sounds like another threat."

"It is a warning," Lomax corrected. "Although they have given far less cause for suspicion, the pair on Venus are classified with you and are being given the same treatment. All four of you are of precisely the same type and will be released or executed together."

"So a coupling exists between here and there?" Raven inquired.

"Correct. Emergency action here causes a signal to be sent which precipitates the same action there. The same holds good in reverse. That's why we've kept the two pairs apart. The more time one pair wastes, the greater the chance of the issue being settled for them by the other pair. You are in the unhappy position of the man who remarked that he could cope with his enemies but only God could save him from his friends."

Emitting a deep sigh, Raven lay back and closed his eyes as if concentrating on the problem in hand. That Lomax might listen to his thoughts did not worry him in the least. He had complete confidence in his own mental shield and in the inability of any Earth-type telepath to tune to so high a neural band.

"Charles! Charles!"

The response was long in coming because the other's mind was absorbed in his predicament and had to be drawn away. It came eventually.

"Yes, David?"

"How far have you got?"

"We're being told how four Denebs took after a Terran but were turned away."

"You're lagging behind us then. We're near the end here. Who's dealing with you?"

"A very old man, quick-witted but on his last legs."

"We've got a young one," Raven said. "Rather a sad case. So much so that it wouldn't be thought extraordinary if he had a serious attack or collapsed before we're through. It would appear that the strain had been too much for him. I think we can cover up by taking advantage of his condition."

"What do you propose?"

"We'll feed the recording system a little drama. We'll establish a semblance of innocence, then he'll have his attack and we'll react naturally. He will also react because he can't help it. The result

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will get you out of your fix because we here will have denied you the chance to say a word in your defense."

"How long will it be?"

"Only a few minutes."

Opening his eyes and sitting up in the manner of one who has discovered a bright and hopeful solution, Raven said: "Look, if the life of David Raven is now known in detail it will be obvious that if his body was taken at all, it must have been at the time of his death and pseudo-resuscitation."

"No comment," said Lomax. "Others will decide that point."

"They'll agree," Raven asserted positively. "Now if we accept the far-fetched notion that some other life form could take over the material body of another creature, how could it also confiscate something so immaterial as that creature's memories?"

"Don't ask me. I am not an expert." Major Lomax made a brief note on a pad.

"If I can relate a wealth of childhood memories from the age of three upward," continued Raven with an excellent imitation of triumph, "and have every one of them confirmed by persons still living, where do I stand then?"

"I don't know," said Lomax. "The suggestion is now being considered elsewhere. A signal will tell me whether or not you may extend the theme."

"What if I show that during my youth I self-consciously suppressed my powers, knowing that I was a freak? Is it not true that by definition a freak is a departure from the norm on which natural laws are based? What if I show that the alleged coincidence of four similar freaks in a bunch is attributable to no more than that birds of a feather flock together?"

"It may suffice or it may not," Lomax evaded. "We shall hear pretty soon. If you've anything more to offer, now's the time."

GLANCING around, Raven *saw* the recorder leads buried deep in the wall, the tiny pin in the floor near Lomax's right foot, the connections running from it to a machine in the cellars. He could even view the machine and estimate the efficiency of the lethal ray it was designed to produce.

He and Leina had become aware of all these things at the very first. It would have been easy to detach various leads remotely, without moving from the pneumaseat. It would have been easy to jam the pin or break the power supply to the concealed executioner. The way out was wide open and had been right from the start. There was only one serious obstacle in the route to freedom: a successful break would have been a complete giveaway.

Concealment was the real issue. No fragment of truth must lurk in any biped mind. Humans lived in protective ignorance and should continue to do so at whatever cost. As for the freedom beckoning beyond the armor-plate door, it was only a poor, restricted, third-rate kind of liberty, a plaster and cardboard model of the real thing.

Carelessly his hand touched Leina's, making them of one accord. There were no scanners to watch what was about to occur. There was only the recording system, the lethal projector and the little pin.

Leina pressed David's hand.

"There are and always have been unknown mutants in addition to known ones," he said, making it pleadingly persuasive. "It's a fact that makes ancestral data inadequate and misleading. If my great grandfather, being an unmitigated scoundrel, took great care to conceal his hypnotic powers which he preserved solely for illegal purposes, then it stands to sense—"

He broke off, waited while Leina contributed an obliging yelp of, "Oh, David, look!" and right on top of it shouted, *"What's the matter, Lomax?"*

At the same moment both minds thrust with irresistible power through the other's mental shield. Lomax had no time to inquire what the devil they were talking about or to deny that anything

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was the matter. Automatically his foot rammed down on the hidden pin.

For a fragmentary moment his mind shrieked aloud, "I've done it! Heavens above, I've—" And then his cry was cut off.

XXVIII

A PERIOD of soul-searing chaos and absolute bewilderment followed. Lomax did not know, could not tell whether it was long or short, a matter of seconds or eons. He did not know whether it was now light or dark, cold or warm, whether he was standing up or lying down, moving or still.

What had occurred when he pressed that pin? Had some new and awful device been tested on himself and the other two guinea pigs? Had it hurled him into the past, the future, or into some other dimension? Or, worse still, oh infinitely worse, had it added a multilated mind to his mutilated body?

Then it struck him that he could no longer feel the throbbing agony that had made his life a personal hell these last two years. Sheer surprise and an overwhelming flood of relief stopped his mind's mad whirling. He began to coordinate slowly, uncertainly, like a little child.

It now seemed that he was floating amid a mighty host of brilliant bubbles, large and small. All around him they drifted lazily along, shining in superbly glowing colors while among them pale wisps of smoke wreathed and curled. He was, he thought, like a tiny, rudderless boat on a wide, iridescent river.

The pain was gone and there was only this sleepy, dreamy swaying along the mainstream of blue and green, crimson and gold, starry sparklings of purest white, fitful gleams of silver, momentary flashings of little rainbows, on, on into the infinitude of peace. He was inclined to sleep and was content to slumber for ever and ever, for as long as time went on.

But then his mind stirred as a sense became active and prodded it into attention. It now seemed that with the palely curling gleams of smoke amid the bubbles came an immense multitude of voices, all speaking one tongue.

Some talked in quick, staccato phrases from places afar. Others were nearer and more leisured. It was strange that though each was fully audible he could tell somehow—he did not know how—the precise direction from which each came and the distance of its source relative to the others. A few were near him, very near, voicing mysterious things among the wreaths of smoke, the spheres and the colors.

"Stay with him."

"He may not be vengeful, but stay with him. We want no more impulses like Steen's."

"He said he was ready for this so he should be quicker to adapt."

"He must learn that no man can be an enemy."

More senses swung into operation. In a confused, out-of-focus way he became conscious that the entities he had known as Raven and Leina were still present, sharing his dream-environment. They were holding him without actually touching him, drifting with him through the smoke and the bubbles. They were not the same, yet he knew who they were beyond all doubt.

ALL at once this hazy sense of perception that was not sight cleared itself, adjusted, sprang into full and complete functioning. The myriad bubbles wafted away as if blown by a tremendous breath and took up new positions at immense distances. They were suns and planets, glowing and spinning within the great spaces of eternal dark.

His new vision was nonstereoscopic, devoid of perspective, but had in lieu an automatic and extremely accurate estimation of relative distances. He knew merely by looking which bubbles were near, which far, and exactly how much farther.

Still with the other two, he heard one

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cry, "Charles! Mavis!" and a reply eerily vibrating from far away, "Coming, David!" The names used were not those names, but he thought of them as those names because he could not grasp the new ones but knew to whom they referred.

The surfaces of many spheres could be seen in splendid detail. On many of them creatures lived and swarmed—hoppers, creepers, crawlers, flutterers, flame-things, wave-form entities, being of infinite variety and most of them comparatively low in the scale of life.

But one widespread form was high. It had a long, thin, sinuous body covered by dark gray hide, a well developed and efficient brain, many dexterous limbs and ESP-organs. It enjoyed telepathic power confined to its own especial band. Its individuals could compute as individuals or combine mentally to compute as a mass mind. They roamed far and wide in pencil-shaped, jet black space-vessels, exploring other worlds, patrolling the gulfs and chasms between, mapping, charting, reporting and always ceaselessly searching.

The Denebs!

These were the lords of creation in their own esteem. Absorbing data being fed to him from he knew not where, Lomax understood a lot about the Denebs. They were at the top of the scale of bubble-bound creatures, had great tolerance for all other life forms considered lower than themselves. But they could not abide the thought of sharing the cosmos with another who was equal or higher.

And there *was* one still higher.

So the Denebs were feverishily hunting for the home world or worlds whence came this unbearable competition. They would destroy rivalry at its source if the source could be found. Their black ships prowled and poked and probed and searched amid the endless multitude of bubbles, disturbing but not harming the

[*Turn page*]

"JEFF HITS the headpin right, but he'll never make a hit with that unruly hair. He's got Dry Scalp. Dull, hard-to-manage hair . . . loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic. . . ."

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hoppers, creepers, crawlers and sometimes the little white grublike bipeds established on many widely separated spheres.

Lomax felt a peculiarly intense interest in this last type of creature. Poor little grubs, squirming and wriggling around, building, or trying to build, or hoping ultimately to build rudimentary ramshackle rocket-ships that never would touch more than the fringes of creation. Mournful grubs, sorrowing ones, ecstatic ones, ambitious ones, even petty dictator grubs.

In all probability there were among them individuals a mere fraction better endowed than their fellows and who thought themselves far superior because they could exercise a minute, fragmentary portion of powers entirely normal but said to be supernormal.

Doubtless every colony of them had evolved a grub culture, a grub philosophy and, being unable to conceive anything infinitely higher, might go so far as to think of themselves as made in the image of a colossal supergrub.

Now and again one more daring than the rest might have sneaked from the hiding place of its own grub-conditioning and peered furtively into the dark and seen a great, bright-eyed moth like a nocturnal butterfly beating gloriously through the everlasting night. Then it would cower down, sorely afraid, totally unable to recognize—itself!

AN ENORMOUS surge of life filled Lomax's being as the data filed itself and became estimated. The grubs! The nestlings! Filled with tremendous power, he saw Raven and Leina, Charles and Mavis as he had never seen anyone before. They were with him still, urging him to adapt to the environment.

The little two-legged grubs, he was crying. Ours! Our nestlings waiting for their metamorphosis! If the Denebs, long unable to recognize them for what they were, should now learn the truth from one mind in one colony they will systematically destroy the lot. If one grub learns too much, all may be slaughtered.

"Never," said the one he had known as Raven. "It will never be known to any of them. There are two watchers in every nest, each living inside a grub body. They are guardians. They enter with permission exactly as I took the discarded form of David Raven with his permission. They enter in pairs. It needs one to watch, but two to break material solitude."

"The place we left, *you* left?"

"Two more already have gone in."

They began to leave him, moving silently into the great deeps that were their natural playfields. The Denebs were highest of the bubble-bound; but these, the higher ones, were bound to nothing once their childhood's grub-existence had ended. They went like wide-eyed, supersensitive, multitalented creatures of the great spaces.

Those pale, weak two-legged things, wondered Lomax, what did they call themselves. Ah, yes, *Homo sapiens*. Some among them regarded themselves as *Homo superior*. It was pitiful in a way. It was pathetic.

As instinctively as a baby moves the feet it is not consciously aware of possessing, or a kitten similarly puts forth claws, so did he spread great, shining, fan-shaped fields of force and swoop in the wake of his fellows.

He was alive and filled with a fierce exultation, for he knew what he had become and what the little white grubs had yet to be.

Homo in excelsis!

NEXT ISSUE

LOST ART

***A Novelet of the Treasures of the Past by* BERTRAM CHANDLER**

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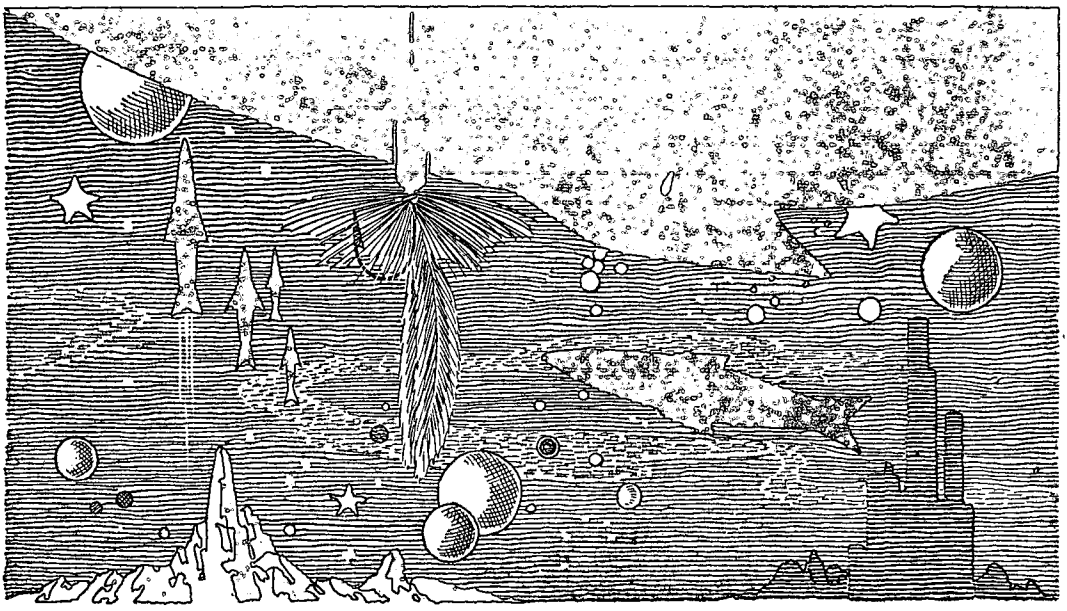

GREASE IN THE PAN

by SAM MERWIN, Jr.

UR KA-TA had painstakingly briefed for his assignment, as was customary when a solo field expedition was assigned by the Mlrata on an alien world. As his little silver-hued space sledge took off under its own power from a port in the flush surface of the huge exploratory craft, he recapitulated his instructions.

First, of course, was the fulfillment of purpose. Purpose in this instance was to discover dominant intelligent species on the third planet of this middle-magnitude sun. Second aim of assignment was study of dominant species, to discover their intelligence level and receptivity to alien life. Then and only then came the matter of contact.

Contact with other intelligent species throughout the Galaxy was of recent and paramount importance to the Mlrata, since their scientists had determined that their own star cluster was doomed to volatility in a matter of a mere few thousand orbits. They were going to need new and habitable planets and, not being of primitive and combative nature, were seeking friendly hosts.

The Mlrata had much to offer. They were probably the most civilized life-form of the universe, having progressed to the one hundred and second level of philosophy, the forty third level of self-

They needed new planets to populate

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analysis—always a difficult subject—and the sixty sixth level of pure thought. They could control weather and climate through community thought, could adapt their formless bodies to almost any life-forms. They could produce nutrients from charred rock, could rear great cities and other structures as easily as their infants could build vacuum toys.

In his present form Ur Ka-ta was a living tribute to Mlrata adaptability and mental ingenuity. After careful study he had been worked into a close copy of what long-range observation had showed the Mlrata expedition experts to be representative of one of the probable dominants.

It was no costume he was wearing, and nothing as primitive as a plastic skin. He *was* the species and if his metamorphosis entailed certain restrictions upon his action, his Mlrata mind was supposed to make up for it. In days gone by long-range observation of the planet would have been deemed sufficient. Now, in this time of urgency, it was thought better to send down a scout in person. Occasionally long-range observation failed to account for the paradoxes that occasionally lurked dangerously on individual planets.

Ur Ka-ta was a typical representative of the species that seemed to swarm over most of this green-blue planet's surface. He felt the slight warmth as his sledge raced, meteorlike, through the thin outer atmosphere, and slowed it telepathically to keep it from being burned as it reached heavier layers of air.

HE WAS moving very slowly when at last his sledge made contact with the surface. He left the sledge in its protective envelope and went out of it onto a world hitherto untouched by Mlrata.

Breathing, of course, was difficult—or would have been had Ur Ka-ta required the process to continue living. As it was he simply shut off the vents of his lungs and did without—although he gave the semblance of breathing for the benefit of possible watchers. He let his mind rove, moved swiftly toward where his telepathic sense informed him were great numbers of beings like himself.

In the thick atmosphere around him his appendages proved less awkward than he had feared they would be. Soon he found himself in a crowded thoroughfare extending between lofty terraces that rose toward the sky. He kept himself out of the whirl of traffic, watching its components, studying them, seeking.

On the whole he was disappointed. He found little evidence of the intelligence he had been led to expect. There was emotion here, much of it—fear, anger, hunger—but he got an impression of function fulfilled for its own sake rather than from intellectual choice. Many wore gay, decorative raiment, but even these seemed to be more concerned with food and security than with aesthetics.

Far above the towers he saw the underside of a great artifact, in shape not unlike the space-ship from which he had descended to this strange planet. It moved swiftly, majestically on its way. More important, it was evidence of true intelligence at work.

After a moment of thought, Ur Ka-ta moved swiftly through the traffic lanes in the direction from which the ship had come. He had obtained from it a new thought-pattern, was able to pursue it like some homing bird of this alien world.

It was an uphill journey but Ur Ka-ta lacked any facility for fatigue. He debated, once, whether it might not be wiser to return to his space-sledge and employ its greater speed, but decided against it. There could be too much risk of discovery and discovery could conceivably spell peril to his parent ship, hovering silent and unobserved, far above the surface he now traveled.

After awhile Ur Ka-ta found himself in a narrow highland valley, whose tur-

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bulent atmosphere made progress difficult. He went on doggedly, however, for he knew he was drawing close to the type of intelligence that had built the vessel he had seen far above him.

Because of his purposeful progress he went his way without molestation, until a strange eerie looking object, a sort of moving tuft, danced annoyingly in front of him. Forgetting his guise, he sought to push it aside with a tendril, forgetting he was not allowed tendrils on this assignment.

Instead, his jaws moved, apparently of their own accord, and he felt something sharp and barbed pierce the under side of his mouth. Abruptly he was yanked toward the side of the valley.

He put up a whale of a battle. The barb was attached to a strong line, but one which ordinarily he could have snapped with a thought. As it was, hampered by his guise, he could only seek to break it, since he could not dislodge the barb without tendrils. Had it not been for his indefatigability he would quickly have lost the struggle for his existence.

Even so, it could only end one way. All at once he felt himself lifted from the heavy atmosphere that covered two thirds of this alien world. It was because of the nature of this atmosphere that he had been given this particular life-form as a probable dominant. He realized the Mlrata experts' error as soon as he felt the mentalities of the big biped at the other end of the line.

It was another alien planet paradox. Here, by some odd mischance, the dominant species did not come from the dominant type of environment. Almost instantaneously Ur Ka-ta extended his telepathic powers, seeking contact and, having gained it, control of these bipeds who were seeking to kill him for sport.

He was concentrating so whole-heartedly that he barely felt the point of the gaff when it passed through one of his few vital regions. He died as quickly as an ant under a boy's sneaker. . . .

I'D NEVER have believed it," said Bill Enright, shaking his head. "A salt-water mackerel this far upstream. And what a scrapper he turned out to be! Baby, I'm bushed."

His wife, who was tending the fire under the sheet-iron oven, grinned at him, a sun-tanned, peeling, freckled grin that held a world of charm and affection.

"Okay, Bill," she said. "I'm hungry. If you've got your super-fish scaled and cleaned, let's have it. I've got plenty of grease in the pan."

Read what happened to Tony Gregg after he found out about the Fourth Dimension in a Syrian restaurant in New York!

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THE GAMBLERS

YOU lie there cold and sweating at the same time. You're nauseated and your insides hurt from all the retching you've done. Your throat burns a little too. But you're a gambler and this is your gamble to keep alive until your ship comes in—the space-ship that is, for you, so aptly named the *Relief*.

You've *got* to stay alive for longer than you care to think about. How many more days? You don't know—you've lost track of time and of day and night. Thirty-nine days—Terrestrial days—altogether from the time the *Relief* left you here until it's due to pick you up again. But you don't know right now how many days have gone by and how many remain. Why did you forget to wind your watch and make marks on the wall for days, as a prisoner does in his cell, to count the days until he'll be free again?

You can't read to help pass the time, even if you felt well enough to enjoy reading, because the Aliens took all your books. You'd gladly give up your life to be able to write but you can't write a word because of that psychic compulsion they put on you under hypnosis. You can't remember the shape of a single letter, even the sound of a single letter, let alone how to spell a whole word.

You'll have to learn to write all over again unless it turns out that the sight of printing or writing brings back your memory when you have a chance to see some again. They saw to it that there isn't a letter of printing anywhere in this tiny dome. Not so much as a serial number on an oxygen tank or a label on a tube of toothpaste.

Of course they took all writing materials and paper too, but you could probably find something to scratch on the wall with if only you knew how to write. You try—you think the word *cat* and you know the sound of it and what a cat is but for the life of you you can't imagine how it would be written, whether with two letters or ten. The very concept of what a *letter* is almost eludes you. You don't quite see how you can put a sound on paper. Yes, it's hopeless without help to try to break that block they put in your mind. You might as well quit struggling against it.

At least you'll be able to talk if you manage to live until your ship comes in. And you've *got* to live so you'll be able to tell them. Not that you want to live, the way you feel now. But you've *got* to. If you have to fight for every breath, then all right, you'll fight. Your own life is the least of it.

You're getting sick at your stomach again. Well, don't think about it. Think

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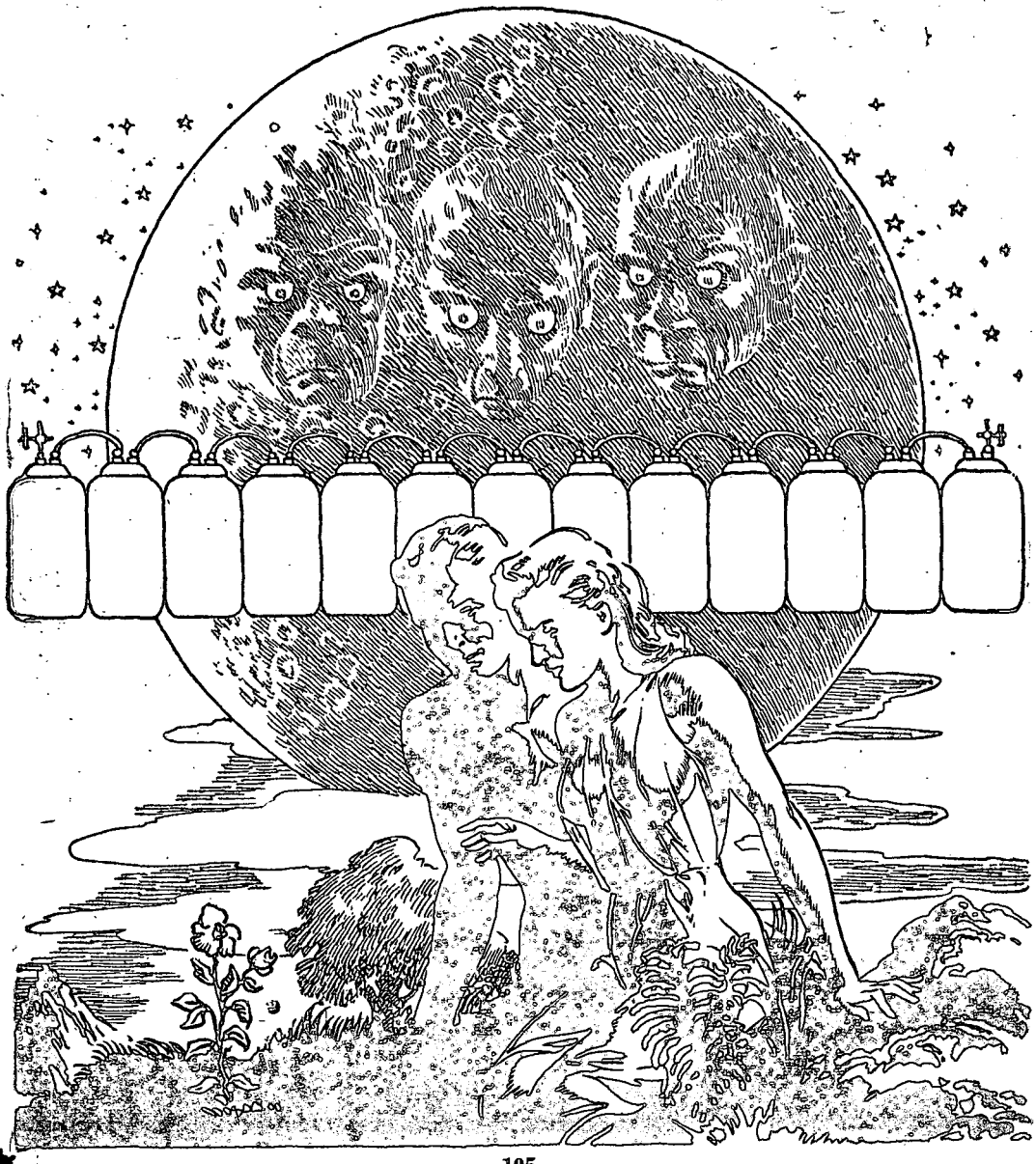
a novelet by MACK REYNOLDS & FREDRIC BROWN

Bob Thayer was no card sharp, but he got into a poker game on the Moon—with the fate of the Earth at stake!



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about something else. Remember your trip here from Earth, good old Earth. Think about it to get your mind off your guts.

REMEMBER the take-off. How much it scared you and how much you marveled at all that you knew—directly or indirectly—was going on. The valves opening, the pumps beginning to stir, the liquid hydrogen and the ozone of the booster device beginning to gush into the motor. The vibration that told you the initial ignition was taking place. The *Relief* stirring sluggishly on its apron.

The roar of the booster, already clearly audible miles away. Inside the ship the sound was heavy, thunderous, penetrating. And then the unknown unanalyzable terrors brought on by the subsonic vibrations. There was noise on every level of sound, those that human ears could hear and those they couldn't hear. No ear plugs could block out the supersonics and the subsonics. You didn't really hear them with your ears at all but with your whole body.

Yes, the take-off had been your biggest thrill in life up to then, much as it seemed to bore the captain and the three-man crew of the *Relief*. It was your first take-off and their twentieth or thirtieth. Well, you had one more coming—the return trip to Earth—if you lived until the *Relief* came back for you. And you'd settle for that—gladly you'd go back to your regular job in the lab of the observatory.

One trip to the Moon and back, with a thirty-nine-day stay there should be enough of an adventure for any man who isn't a spaceman and doesn't ever expect to become one. And one mess like that you're in right now should be enough to satisfy *anybody* for the rest of his life. Only the rest of your life may be a matter of minutes or hours. If the Aliens figured wrong or if you did . . .

Keep your mind away from that. You're going to live all right. You've beaten them—you hope. It doesn't do any good to worry about it. You're doing all you can do, just lying here, trying to be as quiet as you can so you'll use as little oxygen as possible. They left you barely enough food, barely enough water, but the oxygen is your really tough problem. Not *quite* barely enough.

Yet you just *might* make it if you make no unnecessary move to increase your oxygen consumption. Sleep is best—you use less oxygen when you sleep. But you can't sleep all the time. In fact, sick and miserable as you are, you can't manage to sleep much at all.

All you can do is lie quiet and think. Think about anything. Think why you're here.

You're here because—along with a lot of other observatory technicians—you answered an ad in the Astronomy Journal, an ad that excited you. *Wanted, technician, young and in good health, to spend between one and two months alone in small observatory dome on the Moon to make series of photographs of Earth for meteorological study. Must know Ogden star camera and use of filters, do own developing of plates. Must be psychologically stable.*

It didn't say—*must be able to give poker instruction to alien life forms.* But you can't blame the American Meteorological Society for that. There aren't any life forms on the Moon—not even human ones on any permanent basis. Nothing here really worth the trouble except a little observatory like this one. Two or twenty years from now, when they have rockets ready to make the try for Mars and Venus, they'll build bases here, of course, but nothing much has been done yet beyond the surveying stage.

Yes, right now at this moment you are quite possibly the only human being on the Moon. Or if there are any others they are thousands of miles away because the bases are being built in craters near the rim. And this little dome you are in is located dead center, almost, of the Earthward side.

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Well, a fat lot of work you've done. You haven't taken a single picture with the Ogden. Not your fault, of course—the Aliens took the Ogden along with them and you can't take pictures without a camera, can you?

Wasting thirty-nine days—two months, really, counting traveling time and training time—and you won't have a picture to show for it. But if you die they can't blame you for that. Quit thinking that way—you're not going to die—you *daren't* die.

DON'T think about dying. Think about anything. Think about getting here. About how Captain Thorkelsen of the *Relief* dropped you off here—how many days ago? Three or thirty? More than three, surely more than three. If only the opaque sliding door of the top of this little dome were open so you could see through the glass you could tell, at least, whether it's Moon-day or Moon-night.

You could see the Earth and watch it spin around, one Terrestrial day for every spin, and you'd know how long you'd been here and how long there was to go. And Moon-day or Moon-night you could always see it because it would always be directly overhead. But there'd be heat loss, more through the glass alone than through the glass plus the insulated sliding door, so you can't risk it.

The Aliens left you only a third of your complement of storage batteries, barely enough to see you through. Barely enough of everything, so there'd be no chance that you could—by some chemistry alien to them—change something else into the oxygen of which they didn't leave you quite enough.

Sure you can open the door at intervals to look out and then close it again before too much heat escapes but that takes physical energy and physical energy and exercise use up oxygen. You can't risk moving a finger except when you have to.

Captain Thorkelsen shaking your hand, saying, "Well, Mr. Thayer—or maybe I should call you Bob now that the trip's over and we don't have to be formal—you're on your own now. Back for you in thirty-nine days to the hour. And you'll be plenty ready to go back by then, let me tell you."

But Thorkelsen hadn't guessed even remotely *how* ready he'd be.

You grinned at him and said, "I smug-

♠ ♠ ♠ ♠ ♠ ♠ Four Jacks from Tharngel ♡ ♡ ♡ ♡ ♡ ♡

PREACHERS may rant from the pulpit, economists may point out all sorts of utter wastage and reformers may hunt down numbers racketeers by the gross—but people are going to keep right on gambling. Furthermore it seems at least theoretically possible that the gambler, especially in games that require mental skill, is in general a higher type of human than the non-gambler.

It takes skill, judgment and nerve as well as knowledge, wisdom and experience to compute in a matter of seconds the shaping up of a hand of contract bridge or the probabilities of pulling out a hand of canasta after the opposition has set up camp in the discard pile. It takes keenly accurate judgment of character to run a poker bluff successfully and it takes mathematical wizardry and eidetic memory to calculate a roulette system against the house percentage.

Skill, judgment, nerve, wisdom, experience, accurate character judgment, mathematical wizardry and eidetic memory—surely these are all qualities belonging to *homo superior* rather than *homo sapiens.* And surely the proficient card player is more apt to have such qualities in running order than the man who insists that gambling is strictly for suckers or flunkeys of Beelzebub.

And now Messrs. Reynolds and Brown have come up with what is probably the damnedest poker game ever conceived of in fiction—and one in which the stakes range far beyond the mere life of the lone Earthman involved. We hope all you *homo superiors* enjoy it.

—THE EDITOR.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♢ ♢ ♢ ♣ ♣ ♣ ♣ ♣ ♣

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gled something, Captain. One pint of the best bonded Bourbon I could get to celebrate my landing on the Moon. How's about coming into the dome with me for a drink?"

He shook his head regretfully. "Sorry, Bob, but orders are orders. We take off in an hour exactly from time of landing. And that's enough time for you to get into a spacesuit and get there—we'll watch through the port until we see you enter the door of the dome. But it isn't enough time—quite—for us to get into suits and get there and back and out of the suits again in time to take off. You know how schedules are in this business."

Yes, you know how schedules are in spaceflying. And that's how you know—for better and for worse—that the *Relief* won't be fifteen minutes early getting here to pick you up, nor will it be fifteen minutes late. Thirty-nine days means thirty-nine days, not thirty-eight or forty.

So you nodded agreement and understanding. You said, "Well, in that case, can't we open the pint here and now for a drink around?"

Thorkelsen laughed and said, "I don't see why not. There's no rule against taking a drink out here—only a rule against transporting liquor. And if you've already violated that . . ."

For five men, the pint of bonded makes an even two drinks around and they're helping you into the cumbersome space suit while you're drinking the second one. And they're no longer anonymous spacemonkeys to you after three days of close contact en route. They're Deak, Tommy, Ev and Shorty. But Deak, although you call him that to yourself, you call "Captain," even though he calls you Bob now. Somehow "Captain" fits Thorkelsen better than Deak does. Anyway they're all swell fellows. You wonder if you'll ever see them again.

II

BUT you pull your mind away from the present and send it back into the past, the distant past that may have been only a few days ago. You got into the airlock with your luggage, two tremendous cases you could barely have lifted on Earth but that you can carry here quite easily, even cumbered by a spacesuit. And you wave goodbye at them because your face-plate is closed and you can't talk to them any more. And they wave back and close the inner door of the airlock. Then the air hisses out—although you can't hear it—and the outer door opens.

And there is the Moon. The hard rock surface is five feet down but no ladder has been rigged. In Moon gravity it isn't necessary. You throw the suitcases out and down and see them land lightly without breaking and that gives you the nerve to jump yourself. You land so lightly that you stumble and fall and you know they're probably watching you through the port and laughing at you but that it's friendly laughter so you don't mind.

You get up and thumb your nose at the port of the ship and then get the cases and start toward the dome, only forty yards away. You're glad you've got the heavy cases to weight you down. Even carrying them you weigh less than on Earth and you have to pick your way carefully over the rough-smooth igneous rock.

You reach the outer lock of the dome—it's a projection that looks like the passageway-door of an Eskimo igloo—and open the door and then you turn and wave and you can see them wave back.

You don't waste time because you want to get inside while they're still there. If the airlock should stick—not that they ever do, you've been assured—or if anything should be wrong inside, you want to get out again in time to wave to them or warn them. One of them will stay at the port until they take off, which will be in about ten minutes.

You take one more look at the dome from the outside—it's a hemisphere twenty feet high and forty feet across

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at the base. It looks big but it will seem small from the inside after you've been there a while. The supply cabinets and the hydroponic garden take up quite a bit of room and of what's left half is living quarters and half workshop.

You enter the outer door and close it behind you. The little light that goes on automatically shows you the handle you turn to make it airtight. You pull the lever that starts air hissing into the lock. You watch a gauge until it shows air pressure normal and then you reach out and open the inner door that leads to the dome itself.

It's all ready for you. The previous trip of the *Relief* brought and installed the Ogden and the other equipment you'll need, made a thorough inspection of everything. You and your duffle are all the current trip had to bring.

You open the inner lock and step in. And for seconds you think you're stark raving crazy.

There they are, three of them. And you don't doubt, once you know they're really there and that you're not seeing things, that they're Aliens with a capital A. They're humanoid but they aren't human. They've got the right number of arms and legs, even of eyes and ears, but the proportions are different. They're about five feet tall with brown leathery skins and they don't wear clothes. They're all males —they're near enough human so you can tell that.

You drop the cases you're carrying and turn to rush back into the airlock. Maybe you can get out again in time to wave to the *Relief*. Good Lord, it *can't* leave! These are the first extra-terrestrial beings and this is the biggest news that ever happened. You've got to get the news back to Earth.

This is more important than the first landing on the Moon ten years before, more important than the A-bomb twenty years before that, more important than anything. Are they intelligent? A little, anyway, or they couldn't have got through that airlock. You want to try to communicate with them, you want to do everything at once, but the *Relief* will be blasting off in a minute or two so that comes first.

YOU whirl around and get halfway through the door. A voice in your mind says, "Stop!"

Telepathy—they're telepathic! And that word was an order—but if you obey it or even stop to explain the *Relief* will be gone. You keep on going, trying to hurl a thought at them, a thought of hurry, of the fact that you'll come back, that you welcome them, that you're friendly but that a train is pulling out. You hope they can get that thought and unscramble it. Or that they won't do anything about it even if they don't understand.

You're almost through the door, the inner door. Something stops you. You can't move, you're getting faint. Then the floor shakes under your feet and that's the ship taking off. You'd have been too late anyway.

You try to turn back but you still can't move. And you're getting fainter. You black out and fall. You don't feel yourself hit the floor.

You come to again and you're lying on the floor. Your spacesuit has been taken off. You're looking up into an inhuman face. Not necessarily an evil face but an inhuman one.

The thought enters your mind. "Are you all right?" It isn't your own thought.

You try to find out if you're all right. You think you are except that it's a little hard to breathe—as though there isn't enough oxygen in the air.

The thought, "We lowered the oxygen content to suit our own metabolism. I perceive that it is uncomfortable for you but will not be fatal. I perceive that otherwise you are unharmed." The head turns—the thought is directed elsewhere but you still get it. "Camelon," it says, "You owe me forty units on that bet. That reduces

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the total I owe you for today to seventy units."

"What bet?" you think.

"I bet him you would require a greater amount of oxygen than we. You are free to stand and move about if you wish. We have searched you and this place for weapons."

You sit up—you're a little dizzy. "Who are you? Where are you from?" you ask.

"You need not speak aloud," comes the thought. "We can read your mind. Your more limited mind can read ours when we wish to let it do so—as now. My name is Borl. My companions are Camelon and David. Yes, I perceive that the name David is common among you too. It is coincidence, of course. We are of the race of the Tharn. We come from a planet in a very distant system. For reasons of our own security I shall not tell you where or how far with relation to your own system. Your name is Bobthayer. You are from the planet Earth, of which this planetoid is a satellite."

You nod, a useless gesture. You get to your feet, a bit wobbly, and look around. The largest of the three Aliens catches your eye and you get the thought, "I am Camelon. I am the leader."

So you think, "Pleased to meet you, pal." You look at the other and think, "You too, David." You find you can tell them apart. Camelon is inches taller than either of the others. David has a crooked—well, you guess it's his nose. Borl, the one who was bending over you when you came back to consciousness, has a much flatter face than either of the others. His skin is darker, more weathered-looking.

Probably he is older than either of the others. "Yes, I am older," the thought comes into your mind. It frightens you. You've got less privacy than you'd have in a Turkish bath.

"Ten units, David. You owe me ten units." You recognize it as Camelon's thought. How you can recognize a thought as easily as you recognize a voice you don't know but you can. You wonder why David owes Camelon ten units.

"I bet him that you would be friendly. And you are. You are a little repelled by our physical appearance, Bobthayer, but so are we by yours. However, you harbor no immediate thoughts of violence against us."

"Why should I?" you wonder.

"Because we must kill you before we leave. However, since you seem harmless we shall be glad to let you live until then that we may study you."

"That's nice," you say.

"How odd, Camelon," Borl thinks, "that he can say one thing aloud and think another. We must remember that if by any chance we should ever speak to one of these people by any means of communication from a distance. They lie like the primitives of the fourth planet of Centauri."

"You don't lie," you think, "but you murder."

"It is murder only to kill a Tharn. Not one of the lesser beings. The universe was made for the Tharn. Lesser races serve them. You owe me ten more units, David. His fear of death *is* greater than ours despite the fact that our life time is a thousand times his. You felt it when he learned that we must kill him.

"And it is strange. Elsewhere in the universe the fear of death is proportionate to the length of life. Well, it will make for an easier conquest of Earth, his planet, if they are afraid to die. Ah, not too easy—perceive what he is thinking now. They will fight."

SUDDENLY you wish they'd killed you rather than stripped you of your thoughts this way. Or is there any way you can kill them?

"Don't try it," Camelon thinks at you. "You are without weapons and although smaller than you we are approximately as strong. Besides, an one of us can paralyze you with hi

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mind—or make you unconscious.

"We do not, in fact, use physical weapons at all. The idea is repugnant to us. We fight with our minds only, either in individual combat or when we conquer a lesser race. Yes, I perceive you are thinking this would be information your race would like to know. Unfortunately you cannot live to warn them."

"Camelon—" Borl's thought "—I'll bet you twenty units that we are physically stronger than he."

"Taken. The proof? Ah, he came in carrying those two cases, one in either hand, easily. Lift them."

Borl tried. He could and did but with some difficulty. "You win, Camelon."

You think how much these—well, you suppose they're people, in a way—like to make bets. They seem to bet on everything.

"We do." Borl's thought. "It is our greatest pleasure. I perceive you have others beside gambling. Gambling in a thousand forms is our passion and our relaxation. Everything else we do is purposeful. Yes, I perceive that you have other pleasures—you escape reality with stimulants, narcotics, reading.

"You take pleasure in the necessary act of reproduction, you enjoy contests of speed and endurance—either as participants or spectators—you enjoy the taste of food, whereas to us eating is a disgusting but necessary evil. Most ridiculous of all you enjoy games of skill even when there is no wager involved."

You know all that about yourself and what you enjoy. But are you ever going to enjoy any of it again? "No, we are sorry, but you are not."

Sorry, are they? Maybe if you take them by surprise—

But you don't. Suddenly you're paralyzed. You can't move even before you really try. You can't act before you think. And it's useless otherwise. The paralysis ends the minute you think that.

You can move again but you've never been more helpless in your life. If you could only raise an arm to swing. . .

You can—and then you realize that it's too late. The Aliens have gone and you're here alone and dying but you're maybe a little delirious and you are here *now* and not *then* and that part of it is all over. All over but the dying—and the hoping that you won't die, that your gamble worked. Sure, you can gamble too.

You pant for breath and your insides gripe and you're cold and hungry and thirsty because they left you barely enough of everything to survive and then—as they thought, and maybe they were right—they stacked the odds hopelessly against you through thirty-nine days of hell and left you alone to die without even a book to read. But you've got to keep your mind clear in case by some miracle you do survive.

And suddenly you realize how you can tell how long it's been and how long there is to go. You decided, when your mind was still clear enough for you to decide things, that you'd divide the food into thirty-nine even portions and the water into thirty-nine even portions and consume one portion of each per day.

That had been a good idea for the first two days but then you'd forgotten once to wind your watch and it had run down and when you wound it you were nervous and mad at yourself and already in almost more pain than you could stand and you wound it too tightly and broke the spring.

And now you haven't any way of telling time and you decided you'd adopt the system of eating only when you were so hungry you couldn't stand it any longer—and then never eating more than half of a day's food at one time and water to match.

And you think—you *hope*—that you've stuck to that even in the periods when you were delirious and not sure where you were or what you were do-

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ing. But how much food there is left and how much water will be a clue at least to how long it's been.

You get off the cot and crawl—walking is too much of a waste of energy even if you were strong enough to walk—over to where the supply of food and water is. There are twenty portions of each—the time's almost half up. And it's a good sign that the portions are even. If you ate and drank all you wanted in delirium it's not likely that you'd have consumed an even number of portions of food and of water.

You look at them and decide you can wait a little longer, so you crawl back to the cot. You lie as quietly as you can. Can you live another twenty days? You've *got* to.

There was that flash into the mind of Camelon, the leader. It was accidental, some barrier slipped. It happened just after they'd shown you how helpless you were and had released the paralysis.

Some barrier slipped and you saw not only the surface thoughts that he was thinking, but deep into his mind. It lasted how long? A second perhaps and then Borl flashed a mental warning to Camelon and a barrier suddenly was there and only the surface thoughts showed and the surface thoughts were anger and chagrin at himself for having been careless.

III

BUT a second had been long enough. The Tharn were from the only planet of a Sol-type sun about nineteen light-years from Sol and almost due north of Sol—somewhere near the pole star. Its intrinsic brightness was a little less than that of our sun.

From those facts the approximate distance, approximate direction, approximate brightness, a little research — a very little research—would show what our name for that star was. Their name for it was Tharngel. And the Tharn, the inhabitants of Tharngel's one planet, were looking for other planets to which they could expand.

They'd found a few but not many. Our Sun had been a real find for them because there were two planets suitable for their occupancy, Mars with a little less air than they needed, Earth with a little more. But both factors could be adjusted. Such planets—planets with any oxygen atmosphere at all—were extremely rare. Especially with Sol-type suns and only in the radiation of a Sol-type sun could they survive.

So they were returning to their own planet to report and a fleet would come to take over. But it wouldn't arrive for forty years. Their maximum drive was a little under the speed of light and they couldn't exceed that. So the return trip would take them twenty years—then another twenty for their fleet to come and take over.

Nor had they lied about their only weapons being mental ones. Their ships were unarmed and they themselves had no hand weapons. They killed by thought. Individually they could kill at short range. In large groups, massing their minds into a collective death-thought, they could kill many miles away.

You saw other things too in Camelon's mind. Everything they'd told you had been true, including the fact that they couldn't lie, could barely understand the concept of a lie. And gambling was their only pleasure, their only weakness, their only passion. Their only code of honor was gambling—aside from that they were as impersonal as machines.

You even got a few clues—a very few—as to how that death-thought business operated. Not enough to do it yourself but—well, if you had time and expert help to work it out . . .

The help, say, of all the scientists—the psychologists, the psychiatrists, the anatomists—on Earth a new science just might be developed in forty years. With the few slight clues you

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could give them and the knowledge that there *must* be a defense and a counter-offense—particularly a *defense* if Earth wasn't going to be a Tharn colony—Earth's best brains ought to be able to do it in forty years.

"They might at that," a thought, Camelon's thought, comes into your mind, "but you won't be there to give them those clues and tell them what offensive weapon to fear. Or the deadline they'll have to meet."

"They'll know *something* happened if they find me dead here," you think.

"Of course. And as we are taking along your books and apparatus for study they'll know beings from outside were here. But they won't know our plans, our capabilities, where we come from. They won't develop this *defense* of which you were thinking."

"Better take no more chances with him," Borl thinks at Camelon.

"Right. Look at me, Bobthayer." You look at him and his eyes suddenly seem to grow monstrous and you can't move although it isn't the same type of paralysis as before and you suddenly realize that you are being hypnotized. Camelon thinks, "You can no longer harm us physically in any way."

And you can't. It's as simple as that. You *know* you can't and that's that. They could all lie down on the floor and go to sleep and you could have a machine-gun in your hand and you couldn't pull the trigger once.

Camelon thinks at Borl, "No chance of his doing anything now that I've done that. We may yet learn more things of value from him."

"Shall we choose the things we are to take with us when Dral returns with the ship?"

You gather that Dral is one of them and that he has gone somewhere in the spaceship in which they came, which accounts for the fact that there was no ship in sight when the *Relief* landed. You wonder where Dral has gone and why. Probably to look over the bases being started for the rockets to Mars while the others study the contents of

[*Turn page*]

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Thirty-nine years ago, in Forbidden Tibet, behind the highest mountains in the world, a young journalist named Edwin J. Dingle found the answer to this question. A great mystic opened his eyes. A great change came over him. He realized the strange Power that Knowledge gives.

That Power, he says, can transform the life of anyone. Questions, whatever they are, can be answered. The problems of health, death, poverty and wrong can be solved.

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this dome. A casual affirmative thought from David gives you confirmation of your guess.

Camelon is thinking to Borl, "No hurry. He will not be back for hours and it will not take us long. We take all books, all apparatus, nothing else."

THERE is a thought at the back of your mind and you try to keep it there. You try not to think about it. It's not really a thought—it's the thought that there may possibly be a thought if you dig for it and you don't dare dig because they'll catch you at it and know the thought as soon as you do. Deliberately you think away from it. Maybe your subconscious will work out something from it without even you recognizing the score.

It's got something to do with their love of gambling, the fact that the only honor they have has to do with gambling. Think away from it quickly. None of them look your way—the thought was too vague for them to catch. And it hasn't anything to do with harming them—you know you can't do that now.

You sit down and you're bored. You think about being bored so that if they tune in on your mind that's what they'll get. And you really are bored—that's the funny part of it. You're waiting for them to kill you but it's going to be hours yet and there's nothing you can do about it—not even think about it constructively.

You wish there were something to do to fill in the time. These guys like to gamble, don't they? A poker game, maybe. Good old-fashioned poker. Wonder if they'd be any good at it?

But how could you play poker with people who could read your mind? The thought, "What is poker?" flashes at you.

You answer simply by letting yourself think of the rules of poker, the values of the hands, the excitement of the game and the thrill of running a bluff. And then, sadly, that it wouldn't be possible for them to play it because of their telepathic abilities.

"As he thinks of it, Camelon," Borl thinks, "it seems tremendously fascinating. Why shouldn't we try it? A new gambling game would be a wonderful thing to take back to Tharngel—almost as good as the news of two habitable planets if the game is a success. And we can keep up our second-degree barriers so that no thoughts can be sent or received."

Camelon—"It's risky with an alien."

"We know his capabilities and they are slight. You've put him under compulsion not to harm us. And at any move of his we can lower the barriers instantly."

Camelon stares at you. You try not to think but you can't not think at all, so you concentrate on the fact that there is a box of games equipment in a certain locker, that it includes cards and chips. It is there because occasionally this dome has been occupied by two or even three men if the research project they were involved in was a very brief one.

"What about stakes?" Camelon wonders. "Among us we could use Tharn money. Your money if—no, you have none with you, I perceive, because you thought it would be of no use to you here—and anyway your money would be useless to us, ours to you."

You laugh. "You're going to take my books and equipment anyway. Why not win them if you're smart enough." You underlie it with the thought that probably they're too stupid to play poker well and that they'd probably cheat if they did play. You feel the waves of anger, untranslatable because they don't need translation—anger is the same in any language. Maybe you went too far.

"Get the cards," Camelon says. And you realize that he *said* it aloud, in English. You wonder—and then realize that you've been asking all your questions by wondering and that this one isn't being answered.

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You ask, "You speak English?"

"Don't be stupid, Bobthayer. Of course we can speak English after our study of your mind. And of course we can speak—it's simply such an inconvenient method of communication that we use it only under special circumstances such as this. Our barriers are up—we can no longer read your mind or you ours."

The big table serves. Borl is counting out chips. Camelon tells him to issue you chips to the extent of a thousand units on the books and equipment. You wonder how much a unit is and whether you're being gypped or not but nobody answers unasked questions anymore.

Maybe they aren't kidding—maybe the barriers are really up and will stay up while the game is on. Come to think of it they probably will. Poker wouldn't be enjoyable otherwise. Just the same you don't let yourself think too much about anything important—such as your subconscious reason for having wanted this poker game. They might be testing you now even if they intend to maintain their barriers while the game is actually on, while the chips are really down.

You start to play. You deal first to show them how. Draw, jacks to open. Nobody gets openers and the deal passes to Borl. You have to answer a few questions, explain a few minor points out loud in answer to spoken questions. Borl is awkward handling the cards—you wonder that a race of gamblers hasn't discovered playing cards.

Nobody explains. Borl deals and you get queens. You open. Borl and Camelon stay. You don't improve the queens but you bet twenty units. Camelon has drawn three cards and after Borl drops his hand Camelon calls. He's caught a third trey to his original pair and he wins the pot.

They've got the idea all right—you'd better concentrate on playing good poker. You concentrate on it. You have to because they're good. And every indication is that they're on the level, playing square with you. Once, with a busted flush, you push in a fifty-unit bluff and you aren't called although David shows openers.

ONCE you spike an ace to a pair of gentlemen and draw an ace and a king for a full. You bet a hundred and Borl calls you on a ten-high straight. The call almost breaks Borl. He buys chips—and has to buy them from you because all the chips in the rack have been sold.

The stuff he buys them with turns out to be two-inch-square bits of something like cellophane except that it's opaque and has printing on it. The printing is a long way from being in English so you can't read the denominations but you take his word for it—his spoken word.

You hit a losing streak. You lose all your chips and have to use the currency you got from Borl to buy more from Camelon, who has most of the chips by now. But you play cautiously for awhile to learn their style—they've developed styles already. They're taking to poker like cats to catnip.

Borl is a bluffer—he always bets more, if he bets at all, when he has nothing than when he has a good hand. Camelon plunges either way about every fourth or fifth hand—the last two times he had them and that's why he's got the chips now. David is cautious.

So are you for awhile. Then cards begin to run your way and you bet them. You begin to pile up chips, then cellophane units. Darl—the one who had their spaceship—comes back. There's a momentary intermission while barriers are lowered—and you carefully think about nothing except the excitement of the game as poker is explained to Darl. Telepathically, because it's faster and the boys are in a hurry to get back to the game. Darl buys in.

He wins his first pot and he's an addict. Nobody cares what time it is or whether school keeps.

Pots run to a thousand units at a time

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now— as many chips in one pot as you got for all your books and equipment. But that doesn't matter because you've got forty or fifty thousand units in front of you. Darl goes broke first, then Borl —after he's borrowed as much as Camelon will lend him. Camelon's tough and David manages to pike along and stay in.

But finally you do it. You've got all the money and you own one Tharn spaceship to boot. And the game is over. You've won.

Or have you? Camelon gets up and you look at him and remember—for the first time in many hours—that he is an Alien.

"We thank you, Bobthayer," he thinks at you; the barriers are down now. "We regret that we must kill you for you have introduced us to a most wonderful game."

"In what are you going to leave?" you think at him. "The spaceship is mine."

"Until you are dead, yes. I fear we shall inherit it from you then."

You forget not to talk. "I thought you were gamblers," you tell him, all of them, aloud. "I thought you played for keeps. I thought you were honorable when it came to gambling if nothing else."

"We are but—"

Borl forgets and talks aloud too. "He's right, Camelon. We cannot take the spaceship. He won it fairly. We cannot—"

Camelon said, "We *must*. The life of an individual is meaningless compared to the advancement of the Tharn. We will dishonor ourselves but we must return. We must report these planets. Then we shall kill ourselves as dishonored Tharn."

You look at him in wonder and he looks back and suddenly he lowers deliberately a barrier of his mind. You see that he means what he said. They are gamblers and they've gambled and lost and they'll take the consequences. They'll really kill themselves as dishonored—*after* they've reported in.

A lot of good that's going to do you. You'll be twenty years dead by the time they get home. And you won't have a chance to tell Earth what Earth's got to know—what to get ready for in forty years. It's a stalemate but that doesn't help you or Earth.

IV

YOU think desperately, looking for an out. You've won and they've lost. But you've lost too—Earth has lost. You don't care whether they're reading your mind or not. You look desperately for an answer, even one that leaves you a possibility. Maybe you can make a deal.

"No," Camelon thinks at you. "It is true that if you offered us back our ship, our money, the books and equipment in exchange for your own life—which was already forfeit—we could return honorably to our people. But you would warn Earth. As you were thinking some hours ago a defense might be developed by your scientists. So we would be traitors to our own race if we made such a deal with you even to save our own individual honors."

You look at them one at a time, at them physically and into a part of their minds, and you see that they mean it, all of them. They agree with their leader and they mean it.

Darl thinks, "Camelon, we must leave. We go to our deaths, but we must leave. Kill him quickly and let us complete our dishonor."

Camelon turns to you.

"Wait," you say desperately aloud. "I thought you were *gamblers*. If you were gamblers you'd give me a chance, no matter how slim a chance. You'd leave me here with one chance out of ten to survive. And in exchange for that chance I'll give you your own possessions back voluntarily and mine too. That way you wouldn't be stealing them back—you wouldn't be dishonored. You wouldn't have to kill yourselves after you reported."

It's a new idea. They look at you

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Then, one by one, they think negatives.

"One chance in a hundred," you say. There's no change. "One chance in a thousand! I thought you were *gamblers.*"

Camelon thinks, "You tempt us except for one thing. If we leave you here alive you can leave a message for those who are due in thirty-nine days to pick you up, even though you yourself do not survive to meet them."

You'd been hoping for that but they'd read your mind. *Damn* beings who can read minds! Still, any chance at all is better than nothing. You say, "Take away all writing materials."

Borl thinks at Camelon, "We can do better than that. Put a psychic block on his ability to write. A chance in a thousand is little, Camelon, to save our honor. As he says we *are* gamblers. Can't we gamble that far?"

Camelon looks at David, at Darl. He turns to you and raises his hand. You lose consciousness.

You awaken suddenly and completely. The lights are dim. The inside of the dome looks different. You look around and realize that it has been stripped of most of the things that were there. And there is only one Tharn in the room with you—Camelon. You find you are lying on the cot and you sit up and look at him.

He thinks at you, "We are giving you one chance in a thousand, Bobthayer. We have calculated it carefully, everything is arranged. I will explain the circumstances and the odds."

"Go ahead," you say.

"We have left you enough food, enough water—barely enough to survive, it is true, but you will not die of hunger or thirst if you ration them carefully. We have studied your metabolism with great care. We know your exact limits of tolerance. We have, as Borl suggested, also blocked your ability to write so that you can leave no message. That, of course, has nothing to do with your one chance out of a thousand of survival."

"Where's the catch? What's the chance, then, if you leave me enough food and enough water. Oxygen?"

"That's right. We have taken out your oxygen system and are leaving one of our own type. It is much simpler. See those thirteen plastic containers on the table? Each one contains enough liquid oxygen to supply you—by very careful calculation—with enough oxygen to last you three days if you are extremely careful and take no exercise whatever.

"The oxygen is in a binder fluid that keeps it liquid and lets it evaporate at a constant and exact rate. The binder fluid also absorbs waste products. You need open one jar every three days—or whenever you find yourself in need of more oxygen than you are getting, which will be within a matter of minutes of three days."

BUT where's the catch? You wonder. Thirteen containers, each good for three days if you're careful, add up to thirty-nine.

You don't have to ask it aloud. Camelon thinks, "One of the containers is poisoned. There is an odorless undetectable gas that will evaporate with the oxygen. It is sufficiently poisonous to kill ten men of your weight and resistance, of your general metabolism. There is no way to tell it from the other jars without extremely special equipment and chemical knowledge beyond yours. The day you open that container you die."

"Fine," you say. "But how does that give me a chance if I have to use all thirteen containers in order to live through?"

"There is a slight possibility—one which we have calculated very carefully—that you can survive on twelve containers of oxygen. If you can and if you choose the proper twelve—which you have one chance out of thirteen of doing—you will survive. The parley of the two chances adds up to one chance out of a thousand. We leave now. My companions await me in our ship."

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He doesn't wish you good-bye and you don't wish him good-bye either. You watch the inner door of the airlock close.

You go over and look at the thirteen containers of oxygen and they all look alike. The air is very thin and hard to breathe. You're going to have to open one of them quite soon. The wrong one? The one than contains enough poison to kill ten men?

Maybe it would be better if you pick the wrong one first and get it over with. The poison is odorless and undetectable—maybe it's painless too. You wish you'd wondered that while he was still here; he'd have answered it for you. Probably it *is* painless—or is that only wishful thinking?

You look around the rest of the place. They haven't left a thing of value except those thirteen containers and the food and water. It doesn't look like much food and water for that long a period. But it probably is enough, barely, if you ration it carefully. Probably they feared if they left any surplus water you might figure some way to get the oxygen out of it. They were wrong on that but they didn't take any chances—except the thousand-to-one chance.

You're panting, breathing like an asthmatic. You reach for a container to open it. If you do there's one chance out of thirteen that you'll be dead in hours, maybe in minutes. They didn't tell you either how fast-acting the poison is.

You pull your hand back. You don't want to take even one chance out of thirteen of dying until you've had a chance to think carefully. You go back to the cot and lie down to think because you remember that every muscular motion you make cuts your chances.

Have they missed anything, anything at all? The oxygen tank on back of your space-suit. You sit up suddenly and look and see that the space-suit itself is gone. There's no advantage to the airlock—the air that enters it when you pull the lever comes from this room. And the lock is empty now since it was last used for a departure.

The hydroponic garden is gone. So are the emergency tanks of oxygen that were in the storeroom in case of failure of the plants. You realize that you've got up and are wandering around again and you sit down. You cut your chances with every step you take.

One chance in a thousand—*if* you can use only twelve containers of oxygen there's—you figure it out mentally—there must be one chance in about seventy-seven that you'll live. That's what they must have figured. One chance in seventy-seven p a r l a y e d against one in thirteen is about one in a thousand.

But if you could use all thirteen containers your chances would be good, better than even. Not quite a certainty because there is always the possibility that something would go wrong, such as your losing your will power on rationing the food—or, more likely, the water—and dying of hunger or thirst in the last day or two.

You look for something to write with to see if they made any mistake on the hypnotic block. You can't find anything but you find out it doesn't matter. You've got a finger, haven't you? You try to write your name on the wall with your finger. You can't. You know your name all right—Bob Thayer. But you haven't the faintest idea how to write it.

You could talk the message if you had a recording machine, but you haven't a recording machine or any materials which, by any stretch of the imagination, would let you make one. You've got only your brain. You sit down and use it.

YOU forget to wind your watch and then, because of the pain, you wind it too tight and break or jam the spring and you've lost track of time and then comes the time when you find that half of your supplies are gone and you hope that half of the thirty-nine days is gone too.

And then again you're sick and delir

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ous and part of the time you think you're back on Earth and that you've just had a nightmare about creatures from a place called Tharngel and you dreamed within the nightmare that you were playing poker on the Moon and that you won.

Pain, thirst, hunger, struggle for breath, nightmare. And then one day you eat the last of the food and drink the last of the water and you wonder whether it's the thirty-first day or the thirty-ninth and you lie down again and wait to find out.

And you sleep and in your dream you hear an earthshaking racket that could be the landing of the *Relief* except that you know you're dreaming and in your dream the air gets even thinner as air rushes from the dome into the airlock and the airlock opens and Captain Thorkelsen is standing there beside you and you say, "Hi, Captain," weakly and wake up to find out that you weren't really asleep and then you black out.

And when you come around again, there is good breatheable air in the dome and there is food waiting for you to eat and water waiting for you to drink. And all four of them from the *Relief* are standing around watching you anxiously.

Thorkelsen grins down at you. "What have you been doing? Where are all the books and equipment? What happened?"

"Got in a poker game," you tell him. Your throat is dry, still almost too dry to talk, but you drink some water—carefully, a sip at a time.

And then you're telling the story, a bit at a time, as you sip more water and eat a little and you begin to feel almost human again.

And from the way they listen and the way they watch you, you know that they believe it—that they'd believe you even if it weren't for the evidence around them. And that Earth will believe and that everything's all right, that forty years is a long time even to develop a new science when all of Earth is working at it. And you've still got the clues to give them a start and your gamble paid off. You won the poker game after all.

You get tired after a while and have to stop talking. Thorkelsen looks at you wonderingly. He says, "But, Good Lord, man, how did you do it? All those oxygen containers—if that's what they were—are plumb empty. And you say enough poison to kill ten men was in one of them. You look like you've lost thirty pounds weight and you look like you'll need a month's rest before you can walk again but you're *alive*. Did they miscalculate or what?"

You can't keep your eyes open any longer—you've got to sleep. But maybe you can take time to explain.

"Simple, Cap," you tell him. "Each container held enough oxygen for one man for three days and one of them also contained enough poison to kill ten men. But there were thirteen containers, so I opened them all and mixed them together, and then put them back and opened one approximately every three days. So every minute, from the opening of the first one, there's been ten-thirteenths of enough poison in the air to kill a man. For thirty-nine days I've been breathing *almost* enough poison to kill me.

"Of course the effect could have been cumulative and it could have killed me anyway but on the other hand I might have built up immunity toward it. Didn't seem to work either way—I've just been sick from it at a constant degree from the beginning. But it was plenty better than the one chance in a thousand they intended to give me, so I tried it. And it worked."

Vaguely you're aware that Thorkelsen is saying something, but you can't make out what it is and you don't care because you're practically asleep already, the wonderful sleep that you can have only when you're breathing real air with enough oxygen and no poison. You're going to sleep all the way back to Earth and never leave Earth again ever. ■

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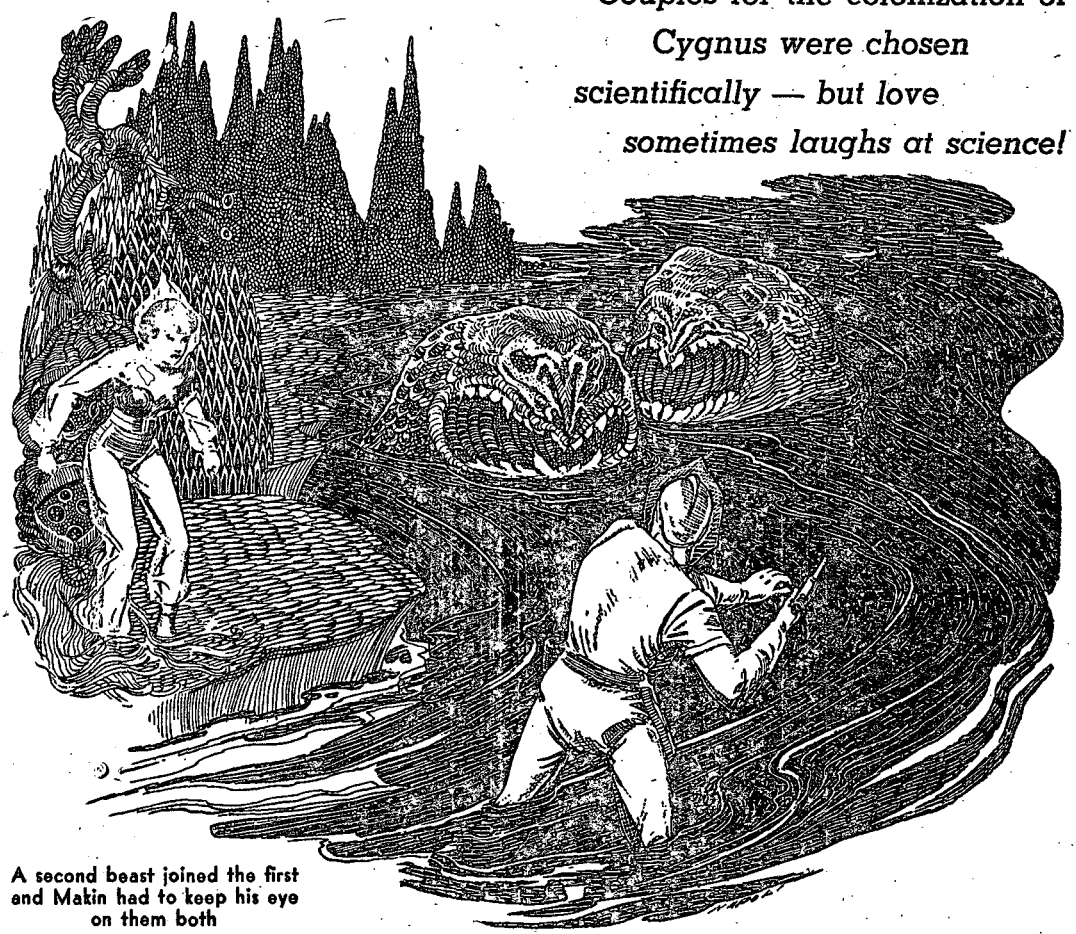
Couples for the colonization of Cygnus were chosen scientifically — but love sometimes laughs at science!



A second beast joined the first and Makin had to keep his eye on them both

The Cupids of Venus

By WILLIAM MORRISON

AS the men filed into the lecture room out of the fog, Makin looked around, but there was no sign that any of the women had been here. In fact, there was nothing to indicate that the women were on the same planet. His heart dropped but he hid his disappointment. As Colonel Galchek strode into the room, he assumed the same cool look of indifference the others showed.

The Colonel stared at them, and the men quieted down. The Colonel had an idea, thought Makin ironically, that he knew how to impose discipline with a glance, but it was more probable that on this last lap of their training before the great adventure the men were anxious to learn what lay ahead of them. At any rate, they listened attentively.

Colonel Galchek was brief. "Gentlemen," he said, "your stay on Venus will be a short one—less than ten days. You

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will be forced to undergo in this brief period, hazards of the same kind you would normally face on Cygnus Beta Two in the course of years. I need hardly say that this sort of training will be invaluable. It is possible—even probable—that of the sixty men here, one or two will not survive the rigors of the course." He looked at them coolly, as if wondering which one or two would not survive. "We shall regret all casualties, of course."

"The dirty liar," thought Makin. "He wouldn't regret a casualty if it was his own grandmother."

"Nevertheless, *some* casualties are unavoidable. And it is far better to suffer them here, where you can reveal your weaknesses while there is still time to correct them, than on a planet in Cygnus. We don't want any unpleasant surprises *there*. Of the fifty couples finally selected to make the trip, we intend to have every one survive. We want the Cygnus colony to get off to a good start. We must prove that it's livable, and that it can take the overflow of the System's population."

HE paused as the men stirred restlessly.

"You're picked men and you've already been through severe training. Your wives have been selected just as carefully as you have. They will be fit mates for you in every respect."

"Are the women," asked Makin, "undergoing the same sort of training in the final stage?"

"Naturally. On Cygnus they'll face the same conditions as you do. They'll need the same preparation."

"Are they on Venus too?"

The Colonel frowned. "They are, but that doesn't concern you. You will have no contact with them until the time for departure. I should like to suggest, gentlemen," he added acidly, "that you confine your questions to matters that concern this group as a whole. Individual problems will be taken up during your interviews this afternoon and tomorrow."

The men shrugged. One man opened his mouth to ask a question and then closed it, the question unasked.

"You'll receive your detailed schedules tomorrow afternoon, after you have all been interviewed. That is all."

The men broke up and went to their rooms. Makin was not tired, but he could have slept if he had wanted to, for he had conditioned himself to fall into a sound slumber upon the mental repetition of a simple nursery rhyme. And from all indications, it would be well to rest up as much as possible for the ordeal ahead of him. All the same, he preferred to stay awake and think.

He had met the girl he knew as Women's Group Member 47, or W 47, for short, accidentally a mere two weeks before, on completion of his space flight. She had been sent in to see her own superior officer at the time he had gone up for a psychological recheck. The elevator signal had been set for the wrong floor, and he had met her in the waiting room.

He had known even at the time that it was hopeless, for the matings were being arranged on a scientific basis, but he had fallen in love with her completely, even, in a manner of speaking, before first sight. He had fallen in love with the shape of the back of her head, of her neck and shoulders, before she had turned her head so that he could see her face. The sight of her clear eyes, and the strong yet delicate chin had merely strengthened his feelings. He had been able to say only a dozen words to her before an attendant had discovered that he was in the wrong place, and firmly escorted him out. But in that time he had heard her voice, and the sound was part of his own existence. He was in love, and he would have one chance in sixty of getting her.

The chance had been long, but not impossible; unfortunately, it had not come through. He had been informed

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only the day before that he had been paired with W-24, and that no change in arrangements was possible.

The men in charge were not idiots, but they could be guilty on occasion of idiotic behavior. He would have died for W 47, and he was being assigned to W 24; some man who wouldn't have crossed the street to save her life was going to get the girl he loved and to live with her for the rest of her life. It was stupid, it would inevitably cause trouble in the new colony, but the men in charge were not concerned with his feelings. They had their rules, and they were going to see to it that they were carried out.

Makin cursed softly to himself. He had volunteered for colonization duty of his own accord, out of a spirit of adventure, and he had up till then accepted discipline with the belief that it was for his own good. Now he refused to accept it further. He hoped they wouldn't force him to do it, but if necessary he would drop out of the colony. They wouldn't like it, but it wouldn't really hurt their plans, for of the sixty men they had certainly calculated on losing one or two. Whatever happened, however, he was going to get that girl.

Having made up his mind about that, he said to himself, "The little birds upon the moon/ Are sad as sad can be/ There is no air,/ And that's unfair/ To bird or bug or bee." With the last word, he was asleep.

His interview with the Colonel took place the following morning, and it settled things for him. The Colonel said, "You were interested in the women's group, Mr. Makin. Is one of them on your mind?"

"Very much so. I want to marry her."

"You are not satisfied with the mate assigned to you?"

"I haven't met her, and I don't know anything about her. I don't want to know."

"Her number, I understand, is W 24. I have her photograph here. You might care to look at it."

Makin looked, and said, "She's a pretty girl. Under other circumstances, I might have liked her."

"She has excellent qualities. Qualities any man would like to see in his wife."

"Sorry, Colonel, I'm not interested. I want to marry W 47."

"This one?"

Again the Colonel showed a photograph, and suddenly Makin was conscious that his heart beat faster.

"That's the one, sir."

"She's been assigned to someone else."

"I think she's in love with me too."

"Love? The word's absurd. You'll both of you change your minds before long."

"I don't think we will."

THE Colonel said testily, "Your psychological pattern shows that you are best suited to W 24. We know what's best for you, Makin."

"Psychology is not yet an exact science, Colonel. I prefer the girl of my own choice."

"You will take the one we choose for you. And incidentally, Makin, there is no backing out. You understand that, I think. Unless you fail to pass the tests, in which case your future is not very bright, you will be a member of the colonizing expedition. And you will be married to W 24 before leaving."

"Do you think that is wise, sir? I tell you frankly that I am in love with W 47. And if she is to be married to another man in the same colony of fifty couples—"

"We have thought of that, Makin." The Colonel smiled pleasantly. "I may have neglected to tell you that there will be not one colony in Cygnus, but two. Another group of fifty couples will be going to Cygnus Sigma Three. At the end of this present training period, you and your mate will be shipped to one colony, W 47 and her mate to the other. There will be no transport between them. You and W 47 will never see each other again."

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"I understand, sir," said Makin quietly. He saluted and went out, leaving the Colonel still smiling behind him.

Down the corridor he received his training schedule and had time to study it. They were starting the men off on individual jungle trips. Each man would be supplied with a map and instruments, with enough food for a week, and with weapons that would enable him, if he were sufficiently strong and active, to cope with the fauna and flora he might be expected to encounter.

He pored over the map, and drew certain conclusions that were not in line with the task that had been assigned him. He was expected to travel from point A to point B in seven days. The distance was short, no more than a hundred miles as the Venusian equivalent of a crow flew, but detours might be necessary and the map covered far more than a narrow strip of territory between the two points.

If the women were undergoing the same kind of training, it was possible that they were being sent through the same jungle in an area alongside. Their starting point might be expected to be not too far away. And if he moved rapidly, not from A to B, but to the side, he might get on her trail.

The only question to be decided was in which direction to move, right or left. He studied the map again, and noted that the jungle at the right was a little less dense. In consideration of the lesser physical strength of the women, it was possible, although far from certain, that they had been given the easier route.

Makin made up his mind. He would move to the right and try to locate her as rapidly as possible. If he made a mistake, he would be losing much valuable time, and be forced to retrace his steps, but there was no other course open to him.

He set off at once to the right. The sun glared down, its disc vague and enormous through a thick lens of semi-transparent clouds, its rays hot and active. Some of the bluish vegetation in his path could actually be seen to grow as he looked at it, but the stalks bent away from him as he approached, repelled by the ST in which his clothes and equipment had been soaked.

Overhead, great bird-like insects soared. One or two of them caught sight of him, swooped down and then zoomed upward in sudden fright as a sound ray from his ultra-frequency projector hit them.

Within the first half-hour he came across a colony of the much-feared traveling fungi, which his guide book assured him were relatively rare. The entire colony began to crawl toward him when he was still a hundred feet away, and he had to destroy its cohesion with an aerosol pellet. A faintly sweetish odor filled the air, and the colony broke up into countless numbers of individual fungi, each growing and dividing, growing and dividing aimlessly, to end up an hour after he had gone as enfeebled and dying individuals, no longer capable of joining together as a super-organism which had been the terror of the animals in his path.

He didn't turn back to look. Five hours after the start, he stopped to eat and rest. The eating took ten minutes, the resting five. By the beam compass and path tracer on his left wrist, which gave him his position at a glance, he saw that he had covered almost twelve miles. The going was not rapid, but he was untired, and he knew that he could keep it up for a long time. He moved on.

The clouds began to thicken and the jungle became dank and gloomy, a vast dismal cavern beneath the heavy arch of vapor. Twice he saw other men of his group, and they passed each other quickly, with the shortest of greetings, each intent upon his own problem.

Now, if his guess was correct, he must be coming close to the area where the women would be forcing their way through the jungle. The vegetation was already more sparse and occasionally he

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could catch a glimpse of a large form slinking silently in the distance past the moving trunks of trees which snapped desperately at it in an attempt to secure much-needed protein.

He turned on the walkie-talkie on his right wrist, and broadcast a signal. If he were lucky, she would be close enough to hear him and reply. But no one answered. He continued to signal from time to time for short intervals, but it was another six hours before he received a signal in return. W 34 wanted to know whether he was hurt and calling for help.

He told her that he wasn't, and asked if she could give him any information about W 47. She couldn't, and he switched off once more, changing direction so that he would cut across W 34's path without meeting her. The incident was a definite bit of encouragement. It showed that he had chosen the correct direction for the women's test area, and that in cutting across to the right he had not dropped far enough behind to be out of contact distance.

He had stored up enough sleep to keep going for a good twenty-four hours without getting too tired, but he did not omit necessary precautions. He stopped to eat again after the normal five-hour period, and this time he rested for twenty minutes.

WHEN he started again, night had fallen. But he strode ahead as confidently as before, a beam from his cap casting a daylight glow around him. And at the end of the third hour, he received in response to his own signal the word he had awaited.

W 47 said softly, "I've been expecting to hear from you."

"You cut across to the left to meet me?"

"As fast as I could."

"What's your position now?"

She told him, and he looked at the map and clenched his teeth. Between them ran a river, a mile in width. Near the center it was several hundred feet in depth. There were deadly water-creatures hidden beneath its surface, and there was no ford where a crossing could be attempted. Nor would it be feasible to build a raft. The large vegetation was heavier than water, and could not be cut down and hollowed out so that it would float except at the cost of more time than they could spare.

Nevertheless, they were within talking distance of one another, and that was the main thing. An hour later, they were at the river, he on his bank and she on hers. But his beam would not cut through a mile of darkness, and he knew that he would have to wait for daylight before catching sight of her.

Colonel Galchek would have enjoyed their conversation. Makin asked gently, "Are you tired, darling?"

"Not very."

"You should go to sleep. But I'd like to give myself five minutes of talking to you."

"Is that all?"

"That will keep me going until morning. What's your real name?"

"Lona. Darling, are your eyes really green, or was it just the light in which I saw you?"

"They're supposed to be greenish-blue."

"I love them. Darling, let me hear you say my name."

The conversation, as Colonel Galchek might have observed derisively, degenerated into an interchange of fairly senseless, but satisfying sounds. But Makin limited himself strictly to five minutes. At the end of that time they wished each other good night and each retired to a clear spot in the middle of a clump of trees.

The fronds recoiled desperately from their ST'd clothing and thrashed around in impotent anger. Any of the larger animals lured by hopes of a human meal would receive a ferocious welcome from these vegetable guardians.

Makin varied his rhyme slightly, using

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the version that would insure awakening at the end of six hours.

He whispered softly, "The little creatures on the moon/ Are sad as sad can be/ There is no air/ And that's unfair/ To things that fly or flee."

His sleep was as sound as ever. But it did not last for a full six hours. Shortly before the awakening time he had set for himself, a shrill howling from the trees around him brought him to his feet. A long, thin constrictor plant had wrapped itself around the fronds of one of his tree-guards, and the tree was whipping back and forth in a vain effort to escape. The other end of the constrictor slipped through the space between the trees and came at him.

His knife was out at once, and he slashed at it vigorously. But the supple bark had the toughness of steel and even the tempered blade left no more than a shallow scratch. The constrictor curled around his right arm, and from that, as he dropped the knife, slid to his body. But his other hand had already secured his heater, and the blinding flame sliced through the thin strangler with startling ease.

The two halves of the constrictor dropped from their victims and slithered away in panic. Soon the charred ends would slough away and then, if the plant-creature were lucky and didn't die at once, they would embed themselves in the soil and slowly grow again.

Meanwhile, Makin rubbed his right arm, which felt paralyzed, and left the clump of trees. He turned on his walkie-talkie, and at once received her signal.

"Darling," she said, "I got up early to think about you, but I didn't want to disturb your sleep. Are you all right?"

"Perfect," he told her. "But don't do it again. You need the rest more than I need the time spent worrying about me."

"The mists are clearing. Shall we try to see each other?"

He stood at the edge of the river and looked across. On the other edge he could make out a small black spot which seemed to move oddly.

"Are you waving your arms?" he asked.

"That's right. You have wonderful eyes!"

Just what *I* was going to say. But your face doesn't look as beautiful as it did the last time I saw you. Not at this distance."

"Why not use your field magnifier?"

"I'm getting it out." He focussed the lenses and grinned. "Are you angry at me, or is that expression natural?"

"It's perfectly natural. I'm sticking my tongue out at you."

"Because I can't think of a way to cross this river?"

"Not at all. Just because I love you."

"That's hardly logical," he said. "But it makes sense to me. What do we do next?"

"Continue upstream on our way to the designated points."

"Not quite. Besides, that's no solution to crossing the river. It doesn't narrow appreciably for fifty miles."

"What are a mere fifty miles?"

"Darling," he said, "don't talk like that, or I'll plunge in and try to swim across. And I'm saving that little trick for a last resort. Shall we start upstream, keeping each other in sight, and see what we can find in the way of ferries?"

"We may as well," she sighed.

IN the river, a creature that seemed to be all mouth and teeth broke the surface and turned toward him. It had no eyes, but it scented his presence as surely as any hound could have done. As he moved upstream, it kept pace with him like a faithful dog. After a mile, another of its kind joined it, and then another, and another. A few words from Lona confirmed the fact that she was being accompanied by a similar pack of hungry and hopeful river-beasts. His chances of crossing the river and joining her began to seem more remote than ever.

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After eighteen hours of travel they slept as before in the center of groups of trees, and this time no incident disturbed the sleep of either one. But next morning the hungry packs were still there, faithfully awaiting what must have seemed to them like promised meals.

That day and the following passed eventlessly and hopelessly. For a few moments Makin had entertained the idea of cutting down one of the larger trees and hollowing it out to make a canoe, but even if he had taken the time, he realized that the craft would have been unstable, and that the waiting beasts would easily have tipped it over to get at him.

On the fourth day of their journey along the river, the jungle began to thin out. Here and there were spaces bare of the frond-trees and in these clearings more and more of the larger animals began to be visible. Two or three attached themselves to his trail, and he could see them from time to time, fearful of the weapons that they knew human beings carried, but hopeful at the same time of a human meal. For the moment they were no more than shadowy dangers, but sooner or later they would attack.

A short conversation with Lona revealed that she too was accompanied by similar companions on land, as well as by the river-pack.

"Take care of yourself," said Makin casually, although his heart beat faster when he heard of her danger.

"Don't worry, sweetheart."

"The river narrows a bit just a little further on. Tomorrow I'm going to attempt a crossing."

"You'll try to swim?"

"Yes. I've thought of a way. It isn't foolproof, but I think I have a very good chance."

"You mustn't! What will become of me if I lose you?"

"I don't think you will. But don't worry, darling, we'll talk it over thoroughly before I start out."

The jungle thinned out until it was no longer jungle, and that night he had difficulty in finding a clump of trees to protect him. He was glad to hear that on her side she had less trouble. When, eventually, he fell asleep, the beasts crouched outside the range of the trees, panting expectantly at the thought of what would happen on the morrow.

In the morning he spoke to Lona again, and made ready. This time, when he left the protection of the trees, the hungry animals could hardly wait. They darted around him, each afraid to be the first to attack, each fearfully watching its fellows to make sure that it was not done out of a meal.

He made straight for the river bank. At sight of him apparently ready to enter the water and escape them, the hitherto soundless animals howled in desperation, while in the water, the mouth-like beasts quivered with eagerness.

The land-beasts attacked. But Makin had his weapon out and although they darted in swiftly, his gun was ready. He cut down four before they came close, and a fifth whose teeth were slashing at him. The animal died in mid-air, its jaws snapping and tearing at the skin of his arm before it hit the ground.

Two remained alive, and these fled. He turned his back to them and directed his gun upon the waiting river-beasts. When he had finished his slaughter, dead creatures floated on the water for a distance of a hundred feet down the river.

He tossed into the water the first animals he had killed, and ran upstream. At a spot where the scent of the dead had not yet reached, he plunged in. For a few moments at least, he would be safe, with the attention of the river's predatory creatures centered on the feast he had so kindly provided for them.

He swam rapidly and steadily, at a pace the he knew he could keep up. From the other side of the river, Lona was keeping an eye on him, ready to warn

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him of danger that approached on the surface. After a quarter of a mile, her signal came. The animals he had killed had been eaten, and the different predators, especially those who had managed to get no more than a taste of the feast, would be seeking new victims. He crushed one of his two capsules of river-repellent as it rested in a pocket of his jacket.

He was barely in time. From the side, one of the mouth-like beasts darted at him, then stopped short, trembling with a sort of animal disgust as it caught the scent-taste of the repellent, diffusing slowly from his jacket into the water. To Makin himself, the chemical had a faint, not unpleasant fragrance, but to the river creatures it was intolerable. This one darted away again as rapidly as it had approached.

But it didn't go far. It returned once more, slowly this time, and followed him as he swam steadily toward the bank where Lona waited. He tried to twist around for a shot at it, but in the water the animal was too quick for him, and all he did was waste precious seconds, in which he could have advanced almost a dozen yards. He didn't make the same mistake again.

HE swam steadily until the increasing boldness of the waiting beast warned him that the supply of chemical in the capsule was near exhaustion. None the less, he kept his nerve. Before crushing his second and final capsule, he waited until the creature was actually darting in for the attack.

It swerved away again, but it had won a partial victory. Makin had hoped he would not have to use this second dose of repellent before covering two-thirds of the distance across the river. But he had been forced to crush the capsule at least fifty yards before this goal. Now he knew that he would have to fight his way the last hundred yards out of the river. And he could gauge his hopes of success by the quickness of the waiting beast, which circled around him easily, and could flash in for the kill while he tried to twist around and raise his weapon.

His hopes were not improved at the three-quarter mark, where a second beast joined the first, and he knew that when the moment for fighting came he would have to keep an eye on both at the same time.

He had passed the deepest part of the river, and a hundred yards from shore he was able to touch bottom. But he continued to swim, for he could advance more rapidly that way than he could by wading. Only when both beasts, as if at a signal, closed in at the same time, did he stand and make the desperate fight that he had known was inevitable.

His first shot missed, and one beast's mouth loomed before him, the teeth sharp and frightening. He swung an arm in front of his face to keep the jaws from snapping at his throat, and the teeth ripped his sleeve to shreds. He had no time for the creature that would attack from the other side, and in the back of his mind he felt that he was doomed.

But it was not in his nature to give up. As the one in front of him twisted around and snapped again, he thrust his arm into its mouth and fired. The blast tore it apart as the teeth sank into his flesh.

He turned around. At his side, the other beast floated, dead, and Lona was trying not to sob.

"Darling, I came as quickly as I could, but I was too slow. You're wounded!"

"Not badly. Not too badly to do this."

He put both the injured and the unharmed arm around her and drew her close. For a second she allowed him to embrace her, then pushed him away.

"Let's get to the bank first."

He said unhappily, "I suppose that's sensible. What slowed you up?"

"The moment I saw you were having trouble, I came to meet you, as I had said I would before you entered the water. But my first capsule was faulty. The chemical in it seemed to have de-

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teriorated, and the beasts came at me when I was no further in than my knees. Luckily, I could use my arm freely enough to fight them off. Then I used the other capsule, and came on. But I had lost time. A second later, and I wouldn't have been able to get the one coming at you from the other side."

SHE shuddered, but Makin said calmly, "You weren't too late. I knew all along that you wouldn't be."

They had reached shore, and this time the embrace was a long one.

Finally she pulled her lips away from his and gasped, "We're not out of the woods yet. Let me bandage your arm."

"The better to embrace you with."

"Let me do the talking. Darling, we still have a wonderful chance to get to Cygnus."

"Together?"

She nodded. "The man who interviewed me was called out of the room. He was out for five minutes, long enough for me to read one or two of the papers on top of his desk, and learn the procedure to be followed on the Cygnus colonizing expedition. We can get on that space ship and once we're on, they'll have to take us."

Makin smiled. "You were unscrupulous enough to meddle with papers that you had no right to touch, despite the code you've been taught, and the penalties with which you've been threatened?"

"Darling, I knew they meant to keep us apart. I wasn't going to let that happen, no matter what the risk."

"Lona, you're wonderful—"

"No, don't kiss me again. Just listen. The space port is twenty miles from here. They don't expect trouble, so it isn't too well guarded. We can get married in the civilian center nearby, using the papers given us for the official mating. Then, if we can get on the ship shortly before it's scheduled to take off, they won't have time to find out that anything's wrong, and once it does take off, it certainly won't turn back for our sake. The only difficulty will be getting on the ship."

"We'll bribe a guard."

"The guards may not be easy to bribe."

"Then we'll threaten them. Or we'll do both. Let's go, darling."

At the civilian center, each had a marriage test certificate ready, and the ceremony took place without trouble. But at the space port itself, there seemed at first little chance that they would be able to get to the ship.

The first guard to whom Makin spoke in private, refused bluntly and was about to raise an alarm, when Makin hit him and knocked him unconscious. Plastic ropes and a gag ensured his silence until take-off time.

With the second guard, a shifty-eyed individual who kept his gaze on the ground, they had more luck. He demanded all their money and their most valuable equipment before consenting to aid them, but finally he was satisfied.

The actual getting on the ship turned out to be simple enough. The guard consulted a register of those already checked through, accepted their identification tags, pretended to compare the numbers with those on his lists, and waved them forward. He would get into trouble later, thought Makin, but the bribe he had received would more than make up for it.

A half-hour after they had been given their compartment, the ship took off. But not until it had circled the planet and was setting a steady course for Cygnus did they breathe freely. Then Makin took her in his arms once more. They were hurtling past Earth by the time he let her go.

IN the Colonization office, Major Crane saluted, and Colonel Galchek said dryly:

"What's the final record?"

"Fifty-one couples for Beta Two, fifty-two for Sigma Three. All on board in first-class condition or close to it. Nothing but such trifles as wounded arms and legs, wrenched backs, and so on."

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"We've topped our quota," said Galchek with satisfaction. "Next time we'll do even better. What were the causes of failure?"

"Of the seventeen listed, there was one joint failure, in which neither man nor woman made the grade. Both physical and mental factors were involved."

Galchek grunted. "Separate them, cure them of what ails them, and give them nice non-adventurous jobs. Go on."

"Three cases of physical failure—two among the men, one among the women. Purely accidental factors involved. They refused to be separated. In each case, the uninjured member of the couple saved his or her partner. I suggest that they be kept together and sent on a later expedition."

"We'll do that. What of the remaining thirteen?"

"Primarily mental. There was slight differences among them, but in each case the pre-encounter suggestions did not work out properly."

"Whose fault?" asked Galchek. "The psychologists?"

"They're not perfect, Colonel, but I think we can blame primarily the human material. Consider the cases that did work, such as those of M 14 and W 47."

"I remember M 14. I think his name was Makin."

"Right. He and W 47 received thoroughly established pre-suggestions that they fall in love with each other, despite the nature of pretended official matings. Well, all he needed was a sight of the back of her neck, her hair and half of one ear, and the thing clicked. From then on, wild horses couldn't have separated them. In fact, wild beasts didn't."

"And in the other cases—the failures?"

"Some had even more protracted first meetings. Undoubtedly, they felt attracted to each other. But five were so thoroughly conditioned to taking orders that they refused to challenge the official matings. They would have allowed themselves to be mated to those they didn't like, rather than risk displeasure for those they loved."

Galchek said with contempt, "They'll make nice officials themselves some day. Old bureaucratic style. They'll be separated?"

"Of course. Of those left, two of the women were so honorable that they refused to examine the papers on my desk when given the opportunity. Three of the men, after going through all the physical dangers, thought it was wrong to bribe a guard. Even that shifty-eyed guard we had placed there for the specific purpose of being bribed."

"The idiots. They'd never make the grade on Cygnus. And the remainder?"

"Danger separated them instead of bringing them together. They quarreled fiercely."

"For them, Cygnus would be death," Galchek said. "Talking about psychologists not being perfect—they're hardly passable. Every individual had a thorough psych-check. None of these things should have happened."

"We know they shouldn't. But they always do. That's why we can't afford to rely on tests alone, and have to put our couples through the mill."

"I still say it's wasteful," growled Galchek. "Of course, the fact that each couple has fought through dangers together and expects to receive punishment for breaking orders if it ever returned to the System, also helps keep them together on a tough job in Cygnus. But the whole thing is a nuisance. Imagine the Colonization Service having to serve as Cupid and arrange all those love matches!"

And the thought of Makin and Lona, and all the other couples now gazing so blissfully into each other's eyes, made him growl again. For it happened that Colonel Galchek, chief Cupid of Venus, had married for money instead of love.

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THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 8)

work and concerns political liberalism.—*Wayne University, Detroit, Mich.*

See what I mean?

WHICH MAG HAS THE TONY?
by W. Paul Ganley, Sec. ISFCC

Dear Mr. Merwin:

It has been quite a long interval since I last sat down to bat out an epistle to a fantasy magazine. Perhaps it only seems long, but honestly, when I have the inclination, I have no time; and with sufficient time, there is little desire. I suspect I shan't regain the old bubbling enthusiasm with which I put together a bundle of fiendish phrases and sent them on their way through the medium of a completely innocent mail carrier.

Nevertheless, I have returned, whether for this month alone or for a longer stay, only time can tell. However, I got STARTLING this afternoon, and decided to do nothing tonight but read it, comment on it, and listen to the Buffalo Bisons get beaten again. The reason for this momentous decision, other than laziness, is to relax my mind to some extent—for on the morrow I have a scholarship exam at the University of Buffalo! Starting next September I'll have even less time to devote to my favorite literature.

A goodly percentage of letters begin, when they don't start off "This is my very first letter to . . . . etc., etc.," by saying, "Haven't written often of late, but this current issue of SS featured such a terrific novel that I just had to sit down and . . ." and so on.

Well, it's not true! THE DARK TOWER was not an outstanding novel—but it was good! It was completely relaxing. Some people dislike space opera, but I don't dislike it when it's well handled; and as you yourself said, West did an excellent job.

Brackett was pretty good. Y'know, Brackett's last two jobs have seemed an awful lot like her husband's work, and the Cap Future stuff had a great similarity to Brackett's type! Could I be wrong, or are they actually collaborating a little bit? Or perhaps revising each other's manuscripts? WOMAN FROM ALTAIR was good, but it was not injected with the pathos that appears in other Brackett tales. WITCH WAR was cute, to say the least, although the idea is by no means new, and in my humble opinion could have used some background padding. THE ULTIMATE ENGINE was satisfactory, though for reasons which perhaps you don't want revealed, I should just shut up about it. However, I really have found Carter Sprague and Matt Lee quite all right. Sam Merwin, Jr., has been getting along pretty well also. Especially that novelette in the last TWS, I PSI!

Now I intend to keep my little nose clean, so will not allow it to protrude into the various discussions going on. I will say that ye editor is more toned down than usual; I will say that the Coles were as easy and interesting reading as always; and that Joe Gibson was likewise, though he used more words. A surprise in the letter column this time was the large amount of people whose names I recognize. Usually there are few of such; and as has been observed many times before, letter writers come and go. How many of the people who were composing missives when I first began a scant two or three years ago are still showing up in letter columns? Not many! It makes me feel I'm getting old—and at my age too! It's a laugh!

I would like to comment on your new system of reviewing fanzines. For various reasons, perhaps not all of them impersonal, I am not in favor of it. I liked the old version better. I shall enumerate some of these reasons. First of all, FAN-FARE has been published eight times, now, and in the seven reviews that have appeared, FAN-FARE has been on the "B-list" or its new equivalent seven times. I don't like to say this, because it sounds conceited to me when I see others doing the same thing, but I firmly believe my fanzine is worthy of more recognition than it is obtaining in STARTLING STORIES. Perhaps not so much the regular issues, although they are *certainly* nothing to apologize for, but definitely the anniversary issue. Let me refresh your mind; and instead of being interviewed by fans for fanzines (as you anecdote-d) for hours on end, spend some of the time relooking at that issue. It was the January, 1951, issue, and contained 46 pages (8x11) including two covers. There were five stories, one of them 10,000 words long. It was mimeographed at least as well as the last issue of the old DREAM QUEST (Vol. 1, #6), and I think about as well as NEKROMANTIKON. Of course, I am unable to print or multigraph or offset or otherwise duplicate it or parts of it, but my mimeoing is neater than typing, so that shouldn't count as a drawback.

If you remember (unless you've deposited in the Bank) the old system divided the fanzines into the good batch (the "A-list") and the not-so-good batch (the "B-list"). At times the "A-list" was very short; at times it was very long. I THINK "FAN-FARE" IS GOOD ENOUGH TO HAVE GOT INTO THE A-LIST UNDER THE OLD SYSTEM. So perhaps my "beef" is mainly selfish; but that doesn't make it any less true. Under the old system, *all* the really good fanzines were given due recognition; now only ten are afforded publicity. One month, there may be only five or six *really* good fanzines, and you will have to pick some not-so-hot jobs. Other times you'll have more than ten magazines, all of which are outstanding, all of which are worthy of recognition. Thus, some which do not deserve recognition are getting it; and some which deserve it are denied it. Is this not true?

Here is another phase of the argument. I have put out an issue of a fanzine which contains what I consider good material, printed on the best paper I could find, mimeographed as perfectly as multigraphing, containing good illustrations, timely book reviews, and an interesting guest editorial. I have done my best, the best I know how. And what happens? It is stuck down there among other "al-

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mosts"—AND AMONG DIRTY ONE-SHEET RAGS THAT SOME FAN TURNED OUT IN A COUPLE OF DAYS AND THAT CONTAIN SOME INSIGNIFICANT DRIVEL! My efforts are not made worthwhile; but even worse, I am no better off than when I started. I can work steadily for two solid months (as I did!) to produce another superissue, but it won't be any better than before. I'll still make the same mistakes, if there are mistakes. WHAT AM I DOING WRONG? No one tells me. You don't; all you do is list my magazine and address and price. I admit that I thought you used to be a little hard on the fanzines before, especially the "B's"—but you're an editor, a competent man, a guy who knows wot's wot! If you deride something, there is a good chance that you have a good reason. If you say I am publishing poor fan fiction, then there!—I know one of the troubles, and can seek to better it! I would rather have you tear FANFARE apart than cast it aside without a word! Once you've torn it apart, I can salvage what is good from the ruins and add superior stuff, knowing the defects of the former attempt.

And what is a darn sight more puzzling!—Rog Phillips writes a whole column (that was his writing, not my review, in his column) on FANFARE and raves about it, while giving honest criticism here and there where it would do the most good; and my spies report that Taurasi (in the triple-S) did somewhat likewise, though that magazine is not available hereabouts. What am I to think!?

I have two favors to request. The first, which I have no illusions about—I doubt any action will result, is that you either return to the old system of rating, or else compromise, and criticize the mags, all of them. (After all, it is a "department of comment and criticism devoted to fandom.") The second favor is that, either in this column or in a private letter, *TELL ME WHAT WAS WRONG WITH THE JANUARY* FANFARE!!"

Didja notice they named a mag after my mag?! —*119 Ward Road, North Tonawanda, New York.*

As you may have noticed, Paul, we have suspended the "ten best" system at least until we learn the ropes. And after that we'll see. Up to now, our contact with fanzines has been occasional, not professional, and we have no developed criterion. We haven't even decided yet whether fanzines as a whole should be encouraged or discouraged. But on the face of it, how can you have anything but admiration for someone who puts everything he's got, including everything he can scrape up in the way of cash, into his brain child? That make you feel any better?

A PLUG FOR CHILDHOOD
by E. E. Newlin, Jr.

Dear Ed:

Although a few months ago you probably heaved a sigh of relief, supposedly safe in the assurance that you were through with me for good, one—or perhaps two—things have prompted me to return from comparative letter-hack retirement.

One is the magnetic-type attraction that ETHERGRAMS emanates. And the other is this recent craze for maturity. I can hardly open the pages of any stf mag without finding something about the fervid quest for maturity. It seems to be treated, even worshipped, as a panacea, as far as stf's troubles are concerned.

We want more mature covers, more mature stories, more mature editorials, more mature letter columns—everything but more mature readers. If a story is bad, it is immature. "Bad" is synonymous with "immature," of course.

Luckily, the maturity that you planned on pinning on ETHERGRAMS hasn't made too great an effect—oh, it's taken out some of the punch that ETHERGRAMS used to have, but it hasn't killed the good-natured atmosphere of good semi-clean fun.

It's been my observation that the most immature are the quickest to brand others with that curse . . . hoping to disguise their immaturity by that ignoble shield. And on close study, we find maturity to be a very liquid word. Mr. Webster & family might tell you it meant ripe, perfected by time or natural growth. However, Roget's Thesaurus gives us "maturity; decline, decay; senility & c." He presents a very gloomy picture of maturity—age, antiquity; cobwebs o' antiquity, and such grim phrases.

Now where (he asks coyly) does stf fit with that? Can you picture a gasping gray-beard tottering through the swamps of Venus? Or a great-grandfather blasting off for Mars? Of course, there is always the Deep Thought-type of story. This is fine, but without a little bit of juicy action, the tale is a dud. Naturally I have nothing against purposeful science-fiction. But I guess that you'll agree with me, old Thing, that the main purpose of stf is sheer entertainment. And now that some of the best writers are saving their best stuff for the slicks, we need a decided amount of emphasis on the entertainment.

But so much for maturity. Before I close, I'd like to say a thing or three about Richard Matheson. I like him, and I'd be glad to see more of him, but I wish the fellow would settle on one set style. So far I've read three different stories in three different styles of his . . . and I may be venturing too much on the statement, but I think Matheson could develop a style which would mark him almost as Bradbury's style has marked Bradbury. Hmmm?—*103 Peck Avenue, San Antonio, 10, Texas!*

We'll grant you this much: that any "quest" for maturity or anything else, can be very phony indeed. Having participated in more than enough literary evenings where all the intellectuals sat around with a glass in one hand and a quip on the tongue, trying to impress each other, and having been thoroughly bored by the same dialogue over and over again, we know what you mean. But I don't think there's anything phony about this particular quest for maturity. You can, after all, have two kinds of

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science-fiction: the comic strip kind or the intelligent kind. The comic strip kind is a western with ray-guns instead of Colts and adds nothing to the stature of the field. The thoughtful kind founds a new literature. Where the raw space opera is going nowhere, the more mature —if you'll pardon the expression—story is only the beginning of something bigger. In order to print such stories you have to have reasonably mature readers and you have to be able to understand each other when you discuss the factors involved.

This is not to cast any aspersions on good clean fun. Let's keep it, but let's not clown all the time. Matter of fact, we happen to like considerable spoofing in our stf stories ourselves and have been frequently downcast in the past by having some fans sneer at stories written for a chuckle, or for satire. Anyway, stick with us and see what happens.

CALL FOR CAPTAIN FUTURE
By Raul Garcia Capella, Jr.

Dear Ed:

There's a rather special reason for my writing to SS—since, you see, I don't often write to mags. I'm looking for a "Captain Future" mag that came out a long time ago. Trouble is, I don't know its date or number. The only thing I have to go on is the cover and story, so . . .

1 The plot: A dark star is approaching the solar system, threatening to engulf it. The only man with the power to stop it—or so he claims—is some doctor or professor who wants to be ruler of the system in exchange for his services. C. F. tells the government to hold on as long as they can while he looks into the matter. During the course of the adventure his ship is crippled and is sucked into the "Sargasso Sea" of space. To get out of it his ship needs extra power. He goes, space-suited into a derelict and gets some generators or something of the sort. He's caught in the act of taking them by what is left of the crew. These characters are aliens. This is the scene for the . . .

2 Cover: CF is before the controls of a spaceship, tangling with the aliens—if I'm not mistaken, they were green, tentacled BEMs. The girl is on the left of the picture. Now to go on with . . .

3 The plot: CF gets to one of Pluto's moons—Styx—which is supposedly covered by water. CF lands on dry land—the water is an illusion created by an unsociable race living there. CF finds out that the dark star is an illusion covering a spaceship. "This is a job for"—(sorry, got carried away). Anyhow, CF boards the evil-doers' ship. There is a scuffle from which CF comes out on top. They live happily ever after. Finis. A later story called "Magic Moon" was a sort of sequel to it.

If you know the name of the story, the number or date of the mag—would you please stick it in a little corner of TEV? And if you don't remember—would you print my letter so fans can help me? I'd like to have the mag 'cause it was the first S-F yarn (full-length) I ever read. I'd appreciate it very much if you gave me a hand—it's the only way I can get it. Thanks!—*480 Clinton Ave., Brooklyn 16, N. Y.*

We've read it, but its antecedants go back to a slightly less organized past, so we can't be omniscient and haul forth the issue, number and date just like that. We'll pass this to the readers—and they'll give you the business, never fear.

ASK A FOOLISH QUESTION . . .
by Bill Warren

Dear Editor Merwin:

I've got no quarrel with the stories in the July SS—none at all. In fact, I am of the considered opinion that they are pretty dern good. I expect most of your mail will give the long tales of the issue good notices; but I'd like especially to mention the little short one you stuck in just before TEV, "Witch War". This one had a lot of moxie, most of which was due to the distinctive style. Very effective—tho I suspect that if a stray English teacher happened to read it, he probably had a bad case of the shakes as a result of seeing all the sentence fragments. Actually, this employment of phrases added mightily to the atmosphere of the piece. I expect you bought the yarn for this reason—no?

I quote from "The Dark Tower": ". . . her breasts rose proudly under the translucent silk..." Why is it that breasts must always rise proudly? Why not jut rudely; spread softly; rear astonishingly; droop listlessly; perk coyly. Or maybe for the hell of it, an author might just let them lay there. Don't get me wrong; I think the "rose proudly" phrase denotes most interesting activity. And I am all for it. But you know what they say about variety and spice and all that.

Can we have your opinion, Mr. Merwin?—*314 West Main Street, Sterling, Kansas.*

This reminds me of an old joke, in which the punch line runs, "Shucks, we ain't gonna dig him up just to ask him that." Anyway, we refuse to answer this question upon good and obvious grounds. An editor doesn't have to put himself on record about everything, does he?

DINGUS
by Joe Gibson

Dear Sam:

Afraid your commentary on West's DARK TOWER was true only insofar as "totally unexpected incident" is concerned. Certainly the Memory Bank idea could've had more far-reaching consequence to the story than to be used merely as a gimmick whereby the author could indulge in a little "scandalous" playing with the usual degradation of a corrupt civilization. And we've had corrupt civilizations and space-roving barbarian hordes and "things from the Outer Darkness" dominating

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stf so often the past fifteen years it amounts to a plague. Where West did succeed was in taking such well-worn protagonists and making understandable characters of them. Too bad he didn't do it with some new protagonists, though. Why Rolph's Brudders had to be pseudo-Vikings beats me!

That dingus between you and Canuck Morse in Ethergrams has me pawing my beard. Since when were Bradbury's MARTIAN CHRONICLES a dependable reference to human cussedness? And what do you know about Buffalo Bills shooting alien steaks? In the first place, a spaceship's expeditionary crew, be they Charles Atlas graduates or scientific geniuses, cannot be classified as "normal" human beings. To do so is to judge others by yourself, which is Bradbury's trap in my estimation. A spaceship's expeditionary crew might be "normal" only so far as the foot of the ladder leading up to the ship's airlock, when they stop for a last look around at Mother Earth. The men who climb that ladder won't be the same. Frontiersmen are not and never were the same as the civilized sheep they leave behind.

The first men who plunged into the American wilderness to explore weren't Indian haters—they lived with the tribes. Only the gold-seeking Spanish conquistadores and the land-hungry settlers of the American colonies fought the Indians. It was the greenhorn, trigger-happy emigrants of the wagon trains who coined the phrase "only good Injun is a dead Injun," not the frontiersmen. It was the criminal elements driven out of the East that created most of the warfare with the Indians in the West. When the Indians massed and attacked, in the only kind of defense they knew, the frontiersmen were forced to organize the settlers and fight back or be wiped out—though some frontiersmen, whom the settlers naturally despised, sided with the Indians. Very little is said about them in our history books.

As for your disinterest in making the trip to the Moon, Sam, you don't seem to realize that founding a base on that pitted satellite will teach us much about the problems of founding bases on other alien worlds—if it doesn't kill us. Your refusal to take the risks so that other men might fare better certainly won't get you very far up that ladder to the ship's airlock. Reckless courage won't help much, either; the only way to remain alive in a wilderness—virgin forests, a jet-fighter at 40,000 feet, or a base on another world—is to know what you're doing. And the only way to know in the Unknown is to learn. Learn or die. If alien intelligent beings meet these crewmen—the ones who survive—they aren't likely to be carved up as steaks.

In short, it's hardly accurate to judge the men who open new frontiers by the human sheep who follow them, seeking selfish opportunity.

Bill's invitation to a hand of poker reminds me of why I quit the game—rather, quit active participation, let's say. Best way to sit in on a poker game is as, in Bill's case, a representative of the Bank of Canada. Pick out a fairly skilled player who's losing, then stake him to a couple of bucks to keep him in the game. Seven to ten, his luck changes with your stake and he starts winning. Conditions of the stake are that you get half the winnings, to be called for at your discretion. When the guy wins six bucks, take three—making you a dollar to the good—and stake another losing player. By keeping your mouth shut and your billfold out of sight, you can keep the game going all night and end up with more winnings than any of 'em without ever having touched the cards. I quit fiddling the pasteboards back on the Seine River.

And I *did* mean west of the Mississippi, not the Hudson, Sam. Was once a bandy-legged brat on a little cow spread some sixty miles west by north of the Santa Fe National Forest, in as wild a tangle of badlands as found anywhere in New Mexico.

But when you say "the whole material purpose of civilization is to banish the discomfort of the wilderness for the proper civilized human environment of clipped lawn and smooth sidewalk," are you sure you haven't bit a fallacy there? Seems to me this "proper" civilized human environment we have today still isn't far removed from discomfort, and has a hell of a long way to go before it can justifiably be called civilization.

Also, next time you sit on hard bleachers in a broiling sun to yell at a bunch of guys running, jumping and skidding around a baseball diamond, sit back and observe your pathological "urge to endure discomfort without need in the name of pleasure" doing its stuff. Personally, I don't even prefer it on smoke-screened tavern television.—*24 Kensington Ave., Jersey City 4, N. J.*

We really shouldn't get into this argument, since it seems to concern only Gibson and Merwin, but one sentence screams for comment: "In short, it's hardly accurate to judge the men who open new frontiers by the human sheep who follow them, seeking selfish opportunity."

What do you think the men who opened the new frontiers were seeking, Joe? And if you want to take our own West as a sample, were there ever a more greedy, ruthless, murdering bunch than a lot of the tough monkeys who went forth to kill Indians, slaughter the game, wipe out the forests, destroy the soil, rip out the oil and gold and coal and generally wreak havoc on a country so big and lush with natural resources that it was thought something like 2000 years would be required to settle it?

There were heroes among the early pioneers all right, but the word courage is not always synonymous with nobility. In fact, some very brave characters have also been complete heels—present company excepted, of course.

OF ALL THINGS
by Pat Farrell

Dear Sam:

Wha hoppen? You burst out in January with a swell cover, then in March you slap on a humdinger. By the way, let's hope that the gal on the March cover is not a heavy breather. If she was, she would stand an even chance of becoming indecent. But, back to praising and criticizing your covers. As I said, you had swell covers in Jan.

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and March, but then you come out and tag that stinker on your July issue. Why don't you tell your chief artist to bone up on astrogation, those ships squirting red stuff at the tower are going to have one heck of a wreck. Also, if your artist had *read* the story, he would have noticed that half or more of the ships were barb globes. Not elongated popsicles as Buster Brown (alias artist) has 'em.

I'd like to say a few words about "The Dark Tower". I plead on bended knees, if West wants to write like that, lock the doors, bar the windows, and invent any kind of Buck Rogers Ray Gun to keep him out. Let's have more action and less fiddling around with memory banks and Martians. Also, let's have more shorts and less ten-million word monstrosities.

Well, here's my Farrell rating on the stories in the July issue.

Witch War; It was okay 'cept that it was too short.

The Ultimate Engine; Iit wasn't quite up to your usual standards.

The Woman From Altair; It was pretty good but it was too melodramatic.

The Dark Tower; In my opinion and the opinions of a mob of my friends, it was as dead as a doorknob. Th' auld barbs a' their bonny kilties was a little too much for me to stomach.

But enough of nasty cracks about your mag. I started reading S.S. in '50. That's what started me going on stf. From then I've branched out to nothing in particular in a *very* small way.

Well, it's time to sign off. My visiscreen (alias dinner) is calling.

If all the heavy breathing engendered by our March cover could only have been collected in one place, it would have floated the lighter-than-air craft of seven navies. That's why we did it. Anyway, thanks for noticing.

THE STATISTICAL APPROACH
by Anthony Lauria, Jr.

Dear Sham:

(not drunk; just felling good)

Greetings Comrade. The day of the Revolution has arrived. We strike tonight . . . oops—wrong guy. Thought you were someone else. But there are too many home-grown Reds on the loose these days.

Down to the business at hand—namely comments on various and sundry sections of Startling (July).

Section the first:

Subscription A: entitled THE DARK TOWER, by one Wallace West.

(1) initial reaction upon picking up copy of periodical at local candy store. . . . hmmmm . . . huh? . . . . oooooh . . . . West . . . . look at that blurb. . . . CSO maybe (Corny Space Opera) ninety-one pages . . . . beware. . . .

(2) reaction after reading story. . . .hmmmmm . . . . huh ? . . . oooooh plitty goo' . . . . likum stor' ver' much . . . . goo' min'less our. . . .

Subsection the second (B) entitled THE WOMAN FROM ALTAIR, by one Leigh Brackett Hamilton.

(1) mind blank

(2) guessed gimmik when Buck tried to kill Bet.

Subsection C

Sub-subsection ONE: entitled THE ULTIMATE ENGINE, by Carter Sprague

(1) Sprague. . . . .hmmmm. penname of deCamp's . . .no. . . .

(2) typical Sprague ESP story, slightly (maybe more) flat

Sub-subsection TWO: entitled WITCH WAR, by Dickie Matheson

(1). . . .here's where I don't sleep tonight , , , Matheson. thought Lovecraft Horrible. . . . .

(2) aahhhhhhhh. . . terrif. . . . .smelled the Bradbury style six miles, two-thousand six hundred eighty five and one half feet and thirteen inches away. . . . .goo' id'

Now to the letter column. TEV well packed and well-rounded this month. Good material to start a fight over.

To fans commenting on law of gravity in connection with the Bergey cover of the March number. . . . . Flash bulliten from Interplanetary Physical Congres. . . .the Law of Gravity has just been repealed . . . . plop!! (the gown just fell off the cover girl . . . hmmmm . . .)

Concerning your editorial . . . on the new (?) mediums that stf is being reproduced in. Let's take the movies first.

There is a new monstrosity out that goes under the name of "The Thing". As has been reported before (in the pages of several of the competitors) it is derived from "Who Goes There?" by Johnny Campbell (who mentioned that name here?). All and well BUT . . . . the plot remains . . . at least basically . . . the same. The Air Force at the North Pole discovers a huge flying typewriter disk . . . I mean flying saucer . . . imbedded in the ice in the aforementioned region. Upon investigation, an intelligent vegetable is discovered. This glob of gook . . . . to the ghost of Shaw, if he be peering over my shoulder, no harm meant by the term "glob of gook" to denote a vegetable . . . . is possessed with a palate for blood. Ahahaaha(?) the plot thickens—the nearest and most easily available source of blood is dear old Homo sap. The world is endangered (so says the blurbs on the posters).

The critics gave the picture a pretty good rating, but there was something in there (the reviews) that indicated to me that something-stinks-in-Norway-tonight-that-isn't-codfish. Most reviews contained a statement that ran something like the following—"the S.F. boys have managed to turn out a pretty good piece of wierd horror." What gives wit' dese here characters? By Campbell's own admission, the story, as were all of the Don A. Stuart stories, was written to portray the reaction of humans to a given situation, not as a piece of horror.

That seems to be the main drawback of all of Hollywood's stf. . . .the pictures are either corny space opera. . .BEM FEM AND HERO. . . .weird horror (stupid at that) . . . or worse.

Some of Bradbury's stuff would be terrific on the screen, but where in all creation is a group of actors that can portray some of his characters?. While we're on Bradbury, there is the matter of Comrade Pomerantz's statement. Ray's stories are,

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in many cases, not stf in the strict sense of the word.

Then there is the current argument about the state that Man should develop into; i.e. the so-called pure logic as exemplified by vanVogt, and the "complete" man that is supposedly supported by Bradbury. My opinion is that somebody is making a mountain out of ye olde proverbial molehill. Van Vogt's philosophy (I guess you can call it that) does NOT do away with emotions. On the contrary . . . . the Null-A theory produces emotion plus, not emotion nill . . . . . the routing of the impulse through the cortex, and the thought thereafter is not devoid of emotion . . . . it enriches it (emotion).

Bradbury's stories about the burning of fantasy does bring out something—no totalitarian state would allow fantasy to exist. Fantasy involves free imaginative thinking which a totalitarian state most certainly does not want. Some people get the impression from his work that science would destroy fantasy. I think that this premise is wrong. Scientific advance involves imaginative thinking, so why destroy a medium that stimulates it?

Have you read "THE MIND OF SAMUEL MERWIN", by W. A. Willis in the latest (Apr-May) EXPLORER . . . on sale nowten zentz a copy (plug) Hail the ISFCC.

Who do dat cover?

Zee you nexzt month, Zammy.—*873 E. 181st St., New York 60, N. Y.*

No kidding? You don't know who Carter Sprague is? Tell him, men.

FAINT PRAISE
by Bob Hoskins, ISFCC

Dear Sam:

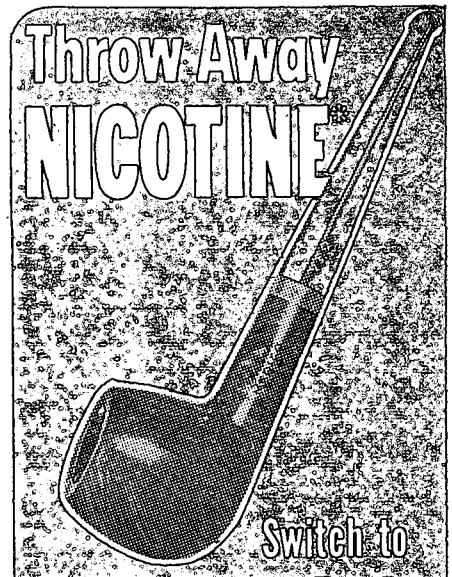
The cover on the latest SS is not so hot. Would be more fitting seen on a copy of *Scintillating Stories of Impossible Adventures on Other Planets.* But it is a thousand percent better than those things you have been featuring up till the new era of a few months ago. I presume it is by Bergey, though I cannot discern his signature.

"The Woman From Altair" is by far the best story in this particular issue, although I haven't as yet completed the novel. The shorts were rather weak, with Matheson being the leader. Your alter ego has turned out a story that has not been equaled for pure hack in many a year, with the exception of that crud to be found in a recent semi-comic book which now, thank God, seems to be defunct. I have just one old and oft voiced question: Wha' hoppen?

Who is Alex Schomburg? His illustrations are among the best of any artist ever to have seen print in any of your mags, which includes Virgil Finlay. I like muchly. His stuff enhances a story, making it more enjoyable to me as a reader. I hope he is a permanent addition to the Thrilling Pub art staff.

I hope you peruse closely the article by Walter Willis of "Slant" fame, giving us impressions on you. 'Tis in the EXPLORER, April issue. Would be interested in hearing of your personal reactions to this.

[*Turn page*]



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Referring to your editorial, I believe that it could be "proved"—or what passes for "proof"—that stf or stfantasy goes all the way back to the earliest days of cavemen. The first story tellers grouped around campfires would certainly be classified as the best fantasy writers now in business, for out of their tortured minds came the folklore and superstitions of their whole races. And these fitted the basic needs of these peoples, for if they had nothing to be afraid of, it is almost certain that they would never have developed protective devices such as fire, the bow and arrow, wheels for speedier flight (I think this was the real purpose of wheels as originally intended) and everything else which is the foundation of our present civilization. Perhaps I had better say "makes up" the foundation, for it in itself is not the whole.

TEV was up to its usual high quality this time. Alfred W. Purdy was good in his lead-off spot with the Coles and Joe Gibson being up in the foreground, as are they always.

With which, I take my leave until tomorrow nite, when I intend to write re: FSM.—*Lyons Falls, New York.*

If it's Schomburg you want, Bob, I trust you have already seen the October TWS which has a Schomburg cover that is really something, no? Also in that October issue you should have seen your answer to the Willis-Merwin affair about which you express curiosity. If you missed it, perish forbid, grab a copy quick and see THE FRYING PAN.

ONE MAN'S FAMILY
by Jimmy Sims

Dear Editor:

I have just finished the July issue of Startling Stories and enjoyed it a good deal. It was not up to par in my opinion though. The best story was Leigh Brackett's THE WOMAN FROM ALTAIR. THE DARK TOWER was also an excellent novel but both short stories didn't please or interest me in the least. Of your recent featured novels the best was STARMEN OF LLYRDIS.

If you don't watch out you are going to lose your spot as the best book of science fiction to Thrilling Wonder Stories. With such stories as OVERLORDS OF MAXUS, I THE UN-MORTAL, NEW BODIES FOR OLD, THE NEW REALITY, and THE CITADEL OF LOST AGES.

It is interesting to watch how different authors take over the leadership in the science fiction field for different periods of time. When I first started reading this type of story the leader was Edmond Hamilton with his Captain Future stories and STAR OF LIFE. He was soon replaced by Henry Kuttner with such classics as THE DARK WORLD, VALLEY OF THE FLAME and THE TIME AXIS. Now it is Leigh Brackett with her stories of the future. Mrs. Hamilton had done well for Startling Stories but better for Thrilling Wonder with such fine novels as THE SEA KINGS OF MARS. Her best hero though is Eric John Stark in his series in another magazine.

Who dares say that Hamilton and Startling should let old Cap Future die? He has earned a place in my heart and I am sure in the hearts of many others that no upstart hero will ever replace. Let him take a vacation but PLEASE don't let him die.

Despite the criticism I still like Startling best.—*Troy, Alabama.*

We're not denying that there have been some excellent Captain Future stories—would we be likely? But on the whole we had the feeling that Captain Future belonged to a somewhat earlier era of science-fiction. We could be wrong, of course; if the small voices in the wilderness which want him back should rise to a mighty storm we would have to admit we were wrong.

WHERE EVERY PROSPECT PLEASES
by Edward G. Seibel

Dear Editor:

I was quite pleasantly surprised yesterday when Mom brought home the latest STARTLING, first by the cover and then by your kind compliance with my request.

When Mom brought the book in, she as usual left it in my bedroom. I came home a while after that and upon entering my bedroom, found my eyes drawn immediately to the middle of the bed where reposed the most beautiful cover on your magazine I have ever seen. For the next ten minutes I sat on the edge of the bed, holding that wonderful Bergey cover in reverent hands, admiring, admiring. . . .

At the end of ten minutes I wrenched my gaze from the cover and opening the book, began to faithfully read your editorial. Perhaps admittedly, I don't agree on a few points in each of your editorials (who ever agrees completely with another person?) but I always find them either informative or thought-provoking or both.

Finishing your editorial I began to browse through the letter section. Halfway through I happened to remember a letter in another issue written to you by a fan who said twelve was normal mentality, etc., which recalled to me the Stanford achievement tests they gave in each grade in grammar school just as each school year had begun.

I hesitate to say it for fear of appearing foolish but at the beginning of the sixth grade I made (I think) 8.9 or 8.1 (I only caught a glimpse of the record sheet) after which they promptly moved me to the seventh grade and would have put me in the eighth except for Mom's violent objections.

Ever since that time I have been curious about how they rated those tests, but no one would ever tell me. Your fan's letter revived that old memory and that still unsatisfied curiosity. Could you by any chance tell me how they rate those tests?

Finally I reached the last page of the letter section where I was most pleasantly surprised by seeing my letter in print and your answer below it—boy! You don't know *how shortly* I did find out. The moment I finished reading your reply and having not yet moved a muscle, Dad walked into

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the room and dropped the card in front of me from the Fantasy Press, which informed me where to send and how much for each book. That's what I call service!

Before I detail the stories in the issue, I wish to set your mind at ease by saying I shall not come at you with the face of a cerastes and swishing my cestus in your direction. Namely, I shall try not to be curmudgeonish.

First, the novel was of a sufficient length to deserve the term. It was a forceful, attention-drawing, well-woven story with very credible people. It is definitely *not* space opera. Only a fool would say that.

In her novelet, Miss Brackett certainly outdid herself. It held my attention all the way with frightening realism.

Sprague's short story was entertaining. That's all I demand of a story.

After reading WITCH WAR I walked warily around young females.

If you keep the standards of your stories as high as this issue's was, that cestus will never be swung.

Glancing through your review of fan publications, I was moved to gales of laughter by the Coles' "ghastly" title. Great Galaxy!—*P.O. Box 445, Oliverhurst, Cal.*

The only way to walk around young females is warily, Ed. Haven't you discovered that yet? I am glad to hear you are a genius, it makes me feel better about the kind of magazine we put out. I don't know much about the Stanford tests except that the kids are getting them in grammar school. The only test I ever took was the regular army Alpha test which was given to the class as a gag by my psychology instructor up at Columbia. The test was supposed to take four hours, I think, and he generously gave us 30 minutes. I remember finishing all the questions, but nobody ever rated it, so, I never did find out whether or not I was a genius. Why don't you go to the library and get yourself a book?

WE PASS
by Johnny Wasso

Dear Editor,

A statement made by Alfred W. Purdy in the July TEV puzzles me. I enjoy "Captain Future" and Ray Bradbury equally well. (And popular music pleases my esthetic sense as fully as classical music.) Am I then a moronic intellectual or an intellectual moron?

P.S. to Editor: Too bad you didn't print my letter of March 6th, Mr. Purdy would find it very interesting!—*119 Jackson Ave., Pen Argyl, Pa.*

Of the two choices you give us, it is hard to say which is worse. Of course your letter was addressed to Merwin and he would undoubtedly

[*Turn page*]

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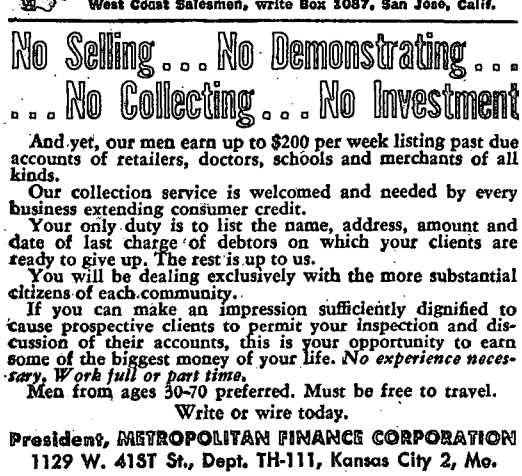
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agree with you about the popular music. I wouldn't. I have met people who claimed to like both classical music and the noisiest kind of popular both. But so far as I am concerned, this is only a claim. The enjoyment of noise so far as I am concerned rules out any real understanding or appreciation of good music. To the foxholes, men, helmets and gasmasks for everyone!

LONELY HEARTS CLUB
by Earl Downey

Dear Editor:

I have 3 reasons for writing this letter, it wont be a long letter as I am in a hurry right now.

1. First reason is to tell you how much I liked your stories in the July issue *SO* here goes.....

1. THE WOMAN FROM ALTAIR....this was a superb storie hope to see more like it soon.

2. THE DARK TOWER.....this storie ran a close race with Brackett's tale.

The shorts were good so I will go on to my other subjects.

2. I would like to correspond with someone, anybody, around here there just aren't any SF readers. So somebody PLEASE drop me a line or six even seven.

3 My last but not least reason for writing is to ask just how to go about getting a storie on to your hallowed desk, huh?

Oh, by the way I think (?) I read in TEV that some of your readers don't like humor(????) in the reader section. Well, the moon devils are hopping over my typewriter. So, after guzzling a gallon of *Jupeternian* (oof) Joy Juice, I jump somwhat giddily onto my Gloopzer (they are back in style, you know) and gallop back into the space hole from which I came. Happily blasting all the pink and purple time machines I see.—*Route 2, Gadsden, Ala.*

Look, Earl, anybody is welcome to drop a story or a cash contribution on this hallowed desk, but you'd better clean up that spelling a little bit. And as for Jupiternian Joy Juice—brother, haven't you heard what happened to Sergeant Saturn and his jug of Xeno? If any of you still want to write to him, I wash my hands of the whole affair.

See you all in a couple of months.

—THE EDITOR

Duruy was a scientist and the girl an enemy agent, but out of their treachery was born a shining cosmic light

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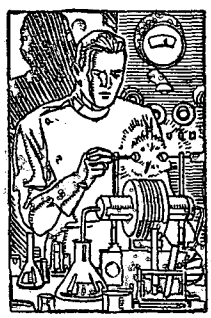
REVIEW OF THE CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION FAN PUBLICATIONS

THE thing we like best about the fanzines is the near-complete lack of inhibitions required. A prozine editor can only wistfully regard such freedom of expression, with his own libel problems riding his neck. Such freedom, of course, places the burden of good taste on the fan editor, not to mention good



judgment. One of the things which happens to a fan is that he becomes a specialist and specialization often leads to splinter groups and splinters sometimes spend more time assailing each other than toiling for the uplifting of the world.

The results, however, are often hilarious, as witness this tidbit culled from ORGASM:

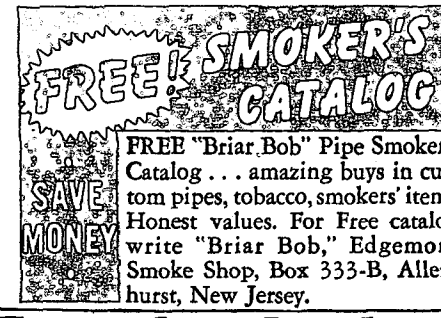
BRADBURYANA

What do you think of Bradbury? Do you think he is the greatest stf writer of our times? My idea of a typical Bradbury yarn is this: a group of earthmen land on Mars and go around knocking down fragile buildings and throwing beer cans about. When they get ready to leave, they find that the Martians have sold their space ship for scrap. "This is it," says Joe. "Yes, it is," says Bill. "I'm getting out of here," says Hemmingway.

—Calr

Honors for make-up and appearance this month are shared between ORB and WASTEBASKET, both of which featured covers, printing, halftones and whatnot. ORB even had a gatefold picture a la ESQUIRE, but not with ESQUIRE's choice of subject. It was a gold ink impressionist job on a black background. Editor Bob Johnson is flirting simultaneously

[*Turn page*]



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with bankruptcy and the temptation to go professional. He promises the next issue of ORB, the NOLACON issue, will have a full color cover by Freas, and interior illustrations by Freas, Bok and others. Snazzy.

The present ish was neatly multilithed, with plenty of line drawings and some halftones from movie stills in the back. No address is on the present issue, but our old one reads Box 941, Greeley, Colorado. The price is 20c a copy.

WASTEBASKET, Vol. 1, No. 2, comes up with covers of Kromekote, so shiny and thick and strong that this editor had to call in help to bend it. Interiors were printed throughout and despite Editor Vernon McCain's moans about misalignment and amateur printers, the result, in two colors, is quite impressive. Insides contain one fiction (?) story, some fan gossip and a lot of kidding. WASTEBASKET is published now and then by Vernon L. McCain at 146 East 12th Avenue, Eugene, Oregon. It is sent free upon request, but no permanent mailing list is kept, you must repeat your request for each new copy.

Until we get into the swing of the thing, we are going to suspend Sam Merwin's method of rewarding the ten best with his personal notice, letting the rest trail behind. We'd like to see a few issues of each 'zine first—we may decide not to set up an honor roll at all.

TITANIA, official publication of the Queens Science Fiction League. Director, Will Sykora. Single copies 25c. One year (four issues), $1.00. The cover said Spring, 1951, the contents page Spring 1950. In addition to fan material, there were articles by Oscar Friend (ex-editor of TWS and SS, now guiding Otis Kline Literary Agency) and Murray Leinster, verse by Clark Ashton Smith and Frank Belknap Long and an interview with John Campbell Jr. Altogether a more sober effort than some of the ribald numbers.

ADOZINE, 2058 E. Atlantic St., Philadelphia, Pa. Published bi-monthly, 5c a copy. Ads offering books, magazines etc., with space available for those wishing to place same. It's a hep little number, pocket-sized, 4 inches by 6.

SCIENCE FICTION NEWS LETTER, Box 260, Bloomington, Ill., Editor Bob Tucker, 15c a copy, seven issues for $1. Neatly lithoed, this is a crisp and professional job, with some of the best little spot cuts we have seen and with a coverage of books, magazines, films, stories, writers and everything else pertaining to science-fiction and its addicts. Art work by William Rotsler.

SEETEE, published by Tellurian Science Fictioneers, 3046 Jackson St., San Francisco 15, Cal. Single copies 10c. Another pocket-sized job, William D. Knapheide editing. Number 4 contained the conclusion of a long listing of cities visited by Captain Future (flattery) and Number 5 a listing of stf poetry and some lusty whacks at the last issue of WONDER ANNUAL. A lively number.

S-F NEWSSCOPE, published monthly by Fandomain Press, 43 Tremont, Malden, 48, Mass. Simple mimeo job of news items. Editor Publisher Lawrence Campbell. Its continuance seems a matter of some doubt.

WORLDS APART, published irregularly by Stone Age Press at 3401 6th Avenue, Columbus, Georgia. 10c a copy, editor J. T. Oliver. Fiction, poetry, satire and even a story contest.

ETAOIN SHRDLU published by MidManhattan Science Fiction Society announces its demise with the Spring-Summer ish of 1951. All inquiries will be handled by Stephen Taller, 40 West 77th Street, New York 24, N.Y.

FAN-VET, a side-line of Taurasi's, "published in the interests of the Fantasy Fan in the U.S. Armed Forces." Are fans in the army different, Jimmy?

THE BOOK BULLETIN, edited and published bi-monthly by Bobby Pope, SW Hill and Hanover Streets, Charleston, S.C. One cent a copy, six for a nickel. This is the first issue and it announces its purpose of arousing interest in stf in pocketbook form on the grounds that damned few fans have three or four bucks for a hardcover book. Tsk, tsk. Reviews books and fanzines. Four pages.

OPERATION FANTAST. Boiled down British job, lithoed in miniature. Accepts advertising, 40c an inch or $4.20 a full page. Said page is 3½ by 5½. Stf news, condensed in a way to teach a TIME editor a thing or two. We couldn't make anything out of the address, but if you can, here it is: Capt. K. F. Slater, 13 Gp. R.P.C., B.A.O.R. 15. Get it?

COSMAG published bi-monthly by Atlanta Science-Fiction Organization, Ian T. Macauley, editor, 10 cents a copy, six for 50c. Stories, articles, cartoons, whimsy and whamsy and a wistful plea to let's stop talking about Dianetics.

BEWARE edited and published by Ken Beale, 115 East Mosholu Parkway, Bronx, 67, New York. 10c a copy, four issues (one year) 35c. By which reasoning editor Beale deduces that this must be a quarterly—in theory at least. Sells ads too and warns that "This is a Pickled Pixie Publication." That should tell you the worst. Example: an ad (?) for a fanzine printed entirely in Lower Slobbovian. Li'l Abner, where are you?

FAN VARIETY, edited by Bill Venable and W. Max Keasler at 420 South 11th Street, Poplar Bluff, Mo. Some art work by Rotsler who also did a cover for BEWARE, above. FAN VARIETY is loaded with entrancing stuff. The May number started with something titled HOW TO DRIVE TUCKER AND TAURASI OUT OF

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BUSINESS and included a treatise in DEFENSE OF THE BELLY BUTTON.

THE BURROUGHS BULLETIN, published by Vern Coriell, Box 652, Pekin, Illinois. For enthusiasts of Tarzan, which is only remotely stf, and the interplanetary novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs. Pretty complete job on a one-note theme.

ROCKETS, The Magazine of Space Flight, published quarterly at 524 Forest Avenue, Glen Ellyn, Ill., editor and publisher, R. L. Farnsworth. Five page mimeographed deal which picks up every possible gleaning of news about rocket experimentation, books and industrial news about same. Interested in the science rather than the fiction.

THE IMAGINATIVE COLLECTOR combined with DAWN, edited by Russel K. Watkins, 203 East Wampum Ave., Louisville, 9, Kentucky. Bimonthly, 15c a copy, 2 for a quarter. Dr. Keller does a book collector's column and Ken Beale is in with a general column of gab about things and people in stf. Editor Watkins is conducting a campaign to clean up Fandom, meaning let's cut out the dirty words and pornography. What pornography?

Well, there you are. More come in every day and we'll have a brand new bunch, survivors, new arrivals and all, in our next.

—*The Editor.*

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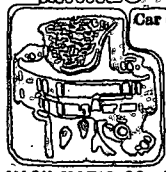

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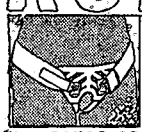

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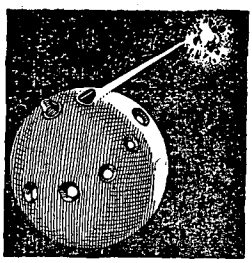

SCIENCE FICTION BOOKSHELF

REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

ROCKETS, MISSILES and SPACE TRAVEL by Willy Ley, The Viking Press, New York, $5.95.

EACH ISSUE of this monumental work becomes more imposing and for those who are interested in the whys and wherefors of science-fiction it provides an indispenable background.

The first issue of ROCKETS appeared in 1944 and each new edition saw enlargements and additions.

The complete record of man's yearning to reach the stars is here, from the earliest fumbling experiments in the Dark Ages of science to the present.

The ancients dreamed of flying to other planets, but the dream was only a dream despite the fact that the rocket had been in existence probably since 3000 B.C. However, toy rockets fired by celebrating Chinese are a very far cry from interplanetary rockets carrying a pay load. Rockets for war purposes are mentioned back in 1258 and an Italian historian named Muratori gives credit to a rocket for victory in the battle for the Isle of Chiozza in 1379. But the rocket declined and won little interest until the Nazis brought it back as a weapon in World War II. And it was their development of the V-1 and V-2 which led ultimately to White Sands and our own government's interest in rocket propulsion. As so often unfortunately happens, it takes a war to spur the development of a device which might otherwise lie idle for centuries.

So begins the era of the space ship and with it comes the most fascinating section of Mr. Ley's book. The seriousness with which the problems of building and navigating a space ship are discussed, the problems of lunar bases, the charts and graphs and tables and equations worked out to solve problems are astonishing. They would have been considered sheer insanity a few years ago. But today they seem quite real.

A profusion of illustrations explain many of the more technical aspects, or merely lend excitement, as in some of the stills from the Chesley Bonestell painting for DESTINATION MOON, one of which graces the cover.

ROGUE QUEEN by L. Sprague de Camp, Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, N. Y. $2.75.

Sprague de Camp has a growing list of gentle satires to his credit and ROGUE QUEEN is another in the same vein. The story is relatively unimportant, it is there only as a vehicle for the author to ride in while he pokes fun at humans and their frailties, or for that matter, bees and their frailties. A good satirist is completely democratic in his choice of victims and spares none worthy of his attention.

ROGUE QUEEN unwinds on a mythical planet populated by colonies of humanoid mammals who function like bees. There is a queen who lays eggs, drones whose sole task in life is to fertilize her and female workers whose lives are uninspired by sex. A space ship from earth landing here provides the yeast for a frothy ferment, during which one of the female workers absorbs enough revolutionary ideas to make serious inroads upon the culture of her people. All of which provides plenty of opportunity for spoofing.

There is some question in our minds as to whether this is science-fiction in the usual sense. It could be argued that it is certainly as much science-fiction as GULLIVER'S TRAVELS and that would be true. But it is a relative term. Science-fiction has evolved since Swift's day, just as the detective story has evolved since Poe's day. And with increasing familiarity, the reader instinctively moves in the direction of the more advanced, more sophisticated ideas. Yet for general book sale, there is no question but that these books are better adapted than some of the highly specialized stories in the magazines which would floor a beginning reader.

BEYOND INFINITY by Robert Spencer Carr, Fantasy Press, Reading, Pa. $2.75.

Let it be said at the outset, with hosannas, that Mr. Carr is a *writer*. If you have been

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making excuses for the crudities of some stf stories on the grounds that the writers had to be engineers rather than authors, this is your dish.

The book consists of four stories, three novelettes and a short. BEYOND INFINITY, the long novelette which gives the book its name, is high-grade stuff, an absorbing detour into time and space; not as elemental as many of these things are, but with something up the author's sleeve for a final surprise. Moreover, Mr. Carr brings something of the technique of the well-written detective story to it. The crisp dialogue, the casual handling of emotion to suggest, instead of wallowing in sentiment, the good characterizations are all to its credit.

THOSE MEN FROM MARS is another goody, a rib-tickling satire on human and Martian frailties. The landing of two Martian spaceships on earth—one on the White House lawn, the other in Moscow, gives Mr. Carr a chance to lay about him with a satirical pikestaff which spares no one. This and BEYOND INFINITY are the best stories in the book. MORNING STAR is a much more conventional thing—the "secret watchers from space" idea, handled with competence, but will be quite familiar. And MUTATION is even more familiar—the well known shower of atomic bombs which nearly wipes out mankind also produces a super-race seven feet tall with built-in haloes

[*Turn page*]

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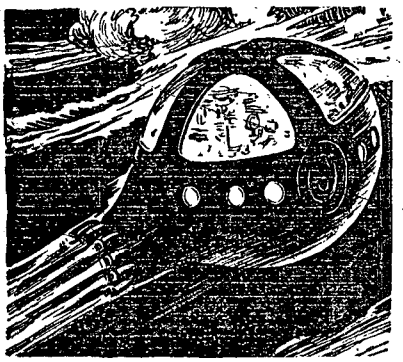

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and dispositions like Great Danes. There can be no doubt Mr. Carr's tongue was firmly in his cheek as he wrote it, but the spoofing was not quite on the order of THOSE MEN FROM MARS. However, the two preferred stories are worth the price of the book.

The jacket design by Hannes Bok illustrates the launching of the rocket ship from BEYOND INFINITY, strongly reminiscent of WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE.

DRAGON'S ISLAND by Jack Williamson, Simon & Schuster, New York ($2.50).

This is a high-tension mystery-adventure story with scientifically-induced mutation as its basis for stf. Laid in the near-future, it takes its hero, Scientist Dane Belfast, on a tight high-wire between elements supporting and seeking the destruction of the amazing experiments of supposedly dead geneticist Charles Kenrew, known to the initiate by a very different name.

It is packed throughout with violence and the threat of violence as Belfast becomes a sort of human rope in a deadly tug of war, is finally flown to New Guinea, seat of the climate mutation experiments. Much of the mystery involved concerns who is for whom in the contest and whether Kendrew is really as dead as the slim records make him.

Really a space opera without space, *Dragon's Island* should appeal to a wide public, including lovers not only of stf but of mystery and adventure stories as well.

RENAISSANCE by Raymond F. Jones, Gnome Press, New York ($2.75).

This, we suspect, is one of Mr. Jones' earlier opera. It reveals less discipline in concept and idea than this gifted author's more recent work, has a looseness of characterization and incident that also suggest a less polished craftsmanship than Jones has shown consistently of late.

Yet in its very wildness and speed and casualness of portraying the folk involved it attains a pace and imaginative appeal that have their own strength and charm for the reader. It contains one of the damnedest patterns of symbiotic cultures, carefully divided by time, space and disaster, of which we have ever read, and its hero, Ketan, lives well up to all legends of supermen in revolt against an order whose constrictions he is innately unable to accept.

Good fun combined with some moments of real horror and excitement and a fat handful of provocative ideas for spice.

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SCIENCE FICTION MOVIE REVIEW

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

Produced by:	George Pal
Directed by:	Rudolph Mate
Screenplay by:	Sidney Boehm
Based on novel by:	Edwin Balmer and Philip Wylie
Color by:	Technicolor
Technical advisor:	Chesley Bonestell

COMPARISONS will inevitably be made between DESTINATION MOON and WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE, so we might as well deal with these at once.

The intent seems obvious to carry DESTINATION MOON's skeletal bareness of story further so as to produce a fuller and more impressive work. Instead of the simple attempt to build a space rocket for its own sake, the almost equally elemental plot of the old Balmer-Wylie novel was impressed for its more impelling reason: Earth is about to be destroyed by collision with an invading star.

This allows room for the human element; unfortunately a good deal of footage is frittered away on an infantile love story tempered only by the sheer pleasure of letting your eyes rest upon Barbara Rush, who is fantastically beautiful in technicolor.

From the mechanical standpoint, WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE is more flamboyant than DESTINATION MOON, with the result that the gadgets sometimes seemed more toy-like.

[*Turn page*]

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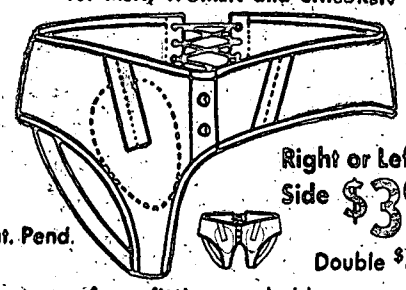

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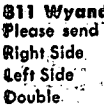

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The earlier picture thus retains a lead in technical integrity.

Yet it is our feeling that these are comparatively minor matters at this stage of Hollywood's second discovery of science-fiction. The important fact is that this picture came fairly close to bringing a science-fiction story to life. It offered a glimpse of the panic which Doomsday would unleash and it achieved real suspense, even of a corny sort.

The fact that we could easily pick it to pieces would mostly mean we were trying to show how smart we were.

From the standpoint of the stf reader, any movie which visualizes in smashing color the things he has so far only imagined from words on a printed page is all to the good. Acknowledging-that it is slanted to a mass audience, not a specialized one, the inevitable corn, the faked props, the space flight lasting ten minutes—all these things must be allowed. There could have been much more on the rocket construction, much more on the actual take-off from Earth and the flight through space. These would have made a more vivid, more compelling and even more beautiful picture, where Bonestell's talents could have been more graphically employed. But these lacks were almost compensated for by some effective shots of eruptions and earthquakes and tidal waves, plus a palpably faked but engaging view of Times Square under thirty feet of water.

One jarring note was the painted backdrop of the new planet revealed to the refugees as they step out of the space ship. It was a Disney-like landscape guaranteed to wring groans from the most hardened fan. To swipe an old gag, this never would have happened if Bonestell had been alive.

As in DESTINATION MOON there were no big names among the actors. Only Richard Derr, seen on TV screens, was known to this reviewer. Miss Rush's beauty has already been noted. Peter Hanson, as her unsuccessful lover, gave indications of charm all but strangled by a poor part.

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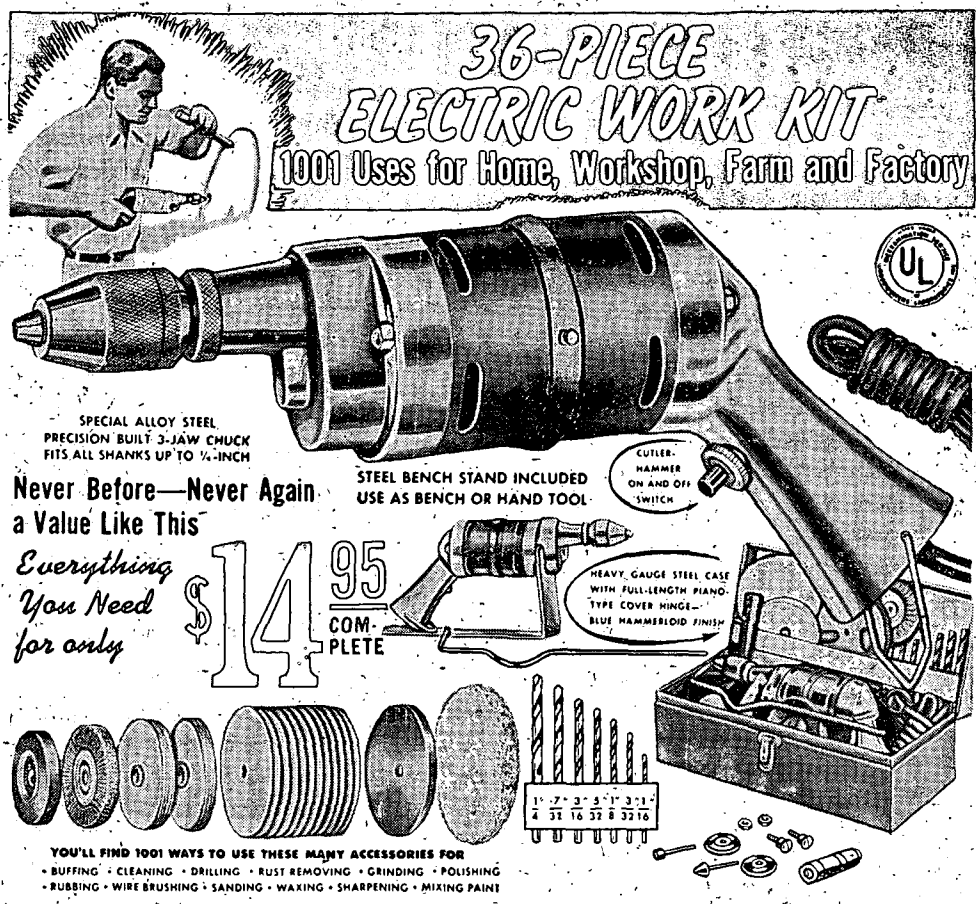
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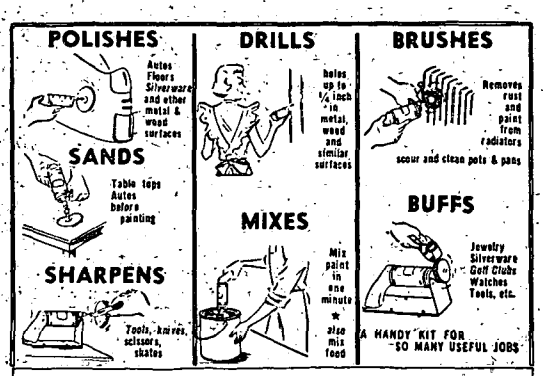
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